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DECEMBER 1938

Vol. 12 No. 2

WESTERN ACES

A. A. WYN, Editor

HARRY WIDMER, Managing Editor

10 STORIES

1. FOUR HORSEMEN FROM HELL (Novel) TOM J. HOPKINS 9
A .45 foursome bucks posse pursuit to silence rangehog sixes.

2. COLD-COUNTRY JUSTICE CHARLES D. RICHARDSON, JR. 26
Two intrepid trappers learn the harsh, unswerving power of cold-country justice.

3. HOOSEGOW ALIBI . . . . . WILFRED MCCORMICK 30
The Calvert cub doesn't cotton much to scrapping—until death faces the old wolf himself.

4. OUTCAST'S BACK-TRAIL . . . . FRANK CARL YOUNG 37
Darrat Loxley risks a hangnoose for himself to prevent a black background from convicting a man who refuses to accept his heritage.

5. GUNPOWDER GAMBLER (Novelette) J. EDWARD LEITHEAD 48
When Johnny Berdan plans an outlaw trick to trap owl-hooters, he overplays his hair-trigger trumps.

6. LONGRIDER LUCK . . . . . C. M. MILLER 67
Ranger Jim Rivers and a badman make a bullet bet on longrider luck.

7. PAY-DIRT GAMBLE . . . . . WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER 77
On that pay-dirt mission, Jess Cattlee expects to make a dinero delivery—not a pistol payment.

8. A GUN-SWIFT'S PAYOFF . . . . DENVER BARDWELL 81
The time has come for Ted Brody to cash in his chips of playing the game on the square, or draw a new hand.

9. PAWN OF SKELETON GULCH . RUSSELL A. BANKSON 91
A prospector figures he's due to go on the prod when gold greed rides his partner.

10. HIGH-TAILIN' HANGMAN . . . . . JACK STERRETT 95
The hombre Hondo Jones is gunning for, saves him—to fling him into a hell-storm of smoke and lead.

★ RANGER FOR A DAY (Extra Story This Month)
SCOTTY RAND 102
Young Sprague doesn't know of his blood bond with the man he saves for the hangtree.

Cover by Leo Morey

This is an ACE Magazine—See Page 6

Published bi-monthly by Magazine Publishers, Inc. Office of publication, 29 Worthington Street, Springfield, Mass. Editorial and executive offices, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y. A. A. Wyn, President. Entered as second class matter on September 14, 1936, at Springfield, Mass., under Act of March 3, 1879. Title registered at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1938, by Magazine Publishers, Inc. Manuscripts will be handled with care, but this magazine assumes no responsibility for their safety. For advertising rates address Ace Fiction Group, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y. Yearly Subscription, 60 Cents; Single Copies, 10 Cents.

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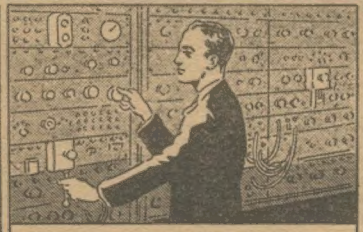

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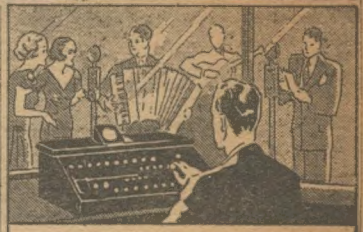

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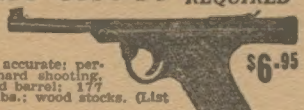

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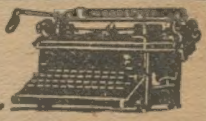

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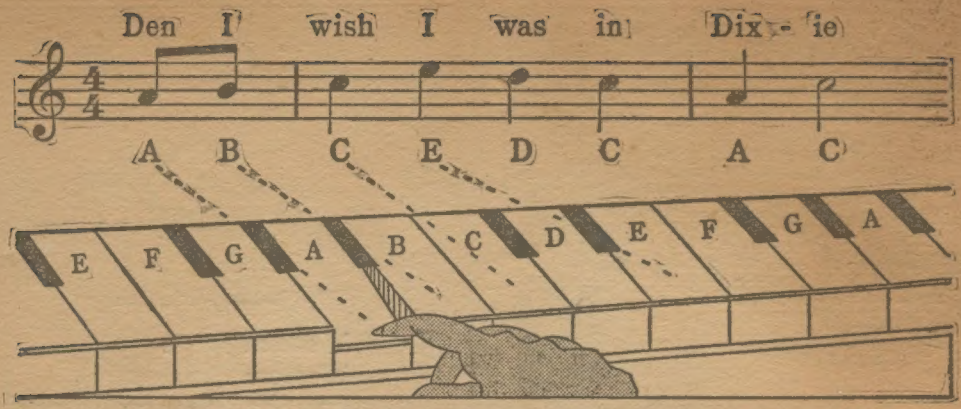

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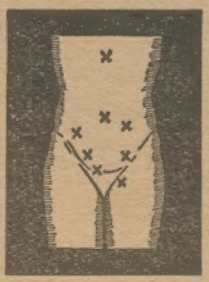

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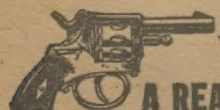

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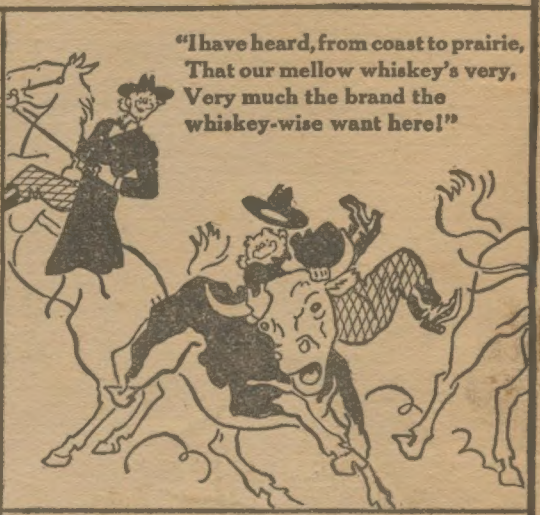

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More shots came crashing from the bunkhouse.

By Tom J. Hopkins

CHAPTER I

An Outlaw's Cub

THE Four Horsemen had pulled up their mounts on the crest of the ridge, and stared down at the beef herd below them. One of them, obviously the leader, shoved his sombrero back on his head and said grimly:

"That's the brand we're a-lookin' for, the Big Arrow."

As he said that, Big Tex shifted in the saddle and looked at the three men with him. Men strangely close to him, for they had ridden the outlaw trail with him, and had served time in Yuma with him.

And now Big Tex demanded: "Anybody changed their mind?"

Dugan and Utah shook their heads, without a word. The slim dark man

known as the Bosque Kid grinned wryly, and spoke.

"We'll get no thanks for this, Tex. Just bullets in our guts!"

Dugan spoke; a smiling, happy-go-lucky fellow who was usually looking for the brighter side. He was a man who had deserved better things than the world had given him. A man of character, with just the little quirk in his brain that sent him out into the dark places with a fellow he would die for—Big Tex. His words were a little hard, despite his smile, as he answered the Bosque Kid:

"That's better'n serving out our time in Yuma, ain't it?"

The four men looked at each other, and nodded slowly. They were thinking about Yuma now, and going back there when this thing was over—if any lived. Going back, to serve out their terms imposed by a just and impartial judge. Four men, four hellions, who had broken out of the toughest prison in the Old West, to help somebody three of them had never seen. And that, mad fools some might have called them, just seven months before they were to be freed, as men who had paid their debts to society and law!

"What them guards won't do to us when they get us back there!" Utah said that rather owlishly, from his fat lips and beaming face. Smiling, chuckling—and throwing lead like a devil from hell when needed! "Well, let's go. What we waitin' for? Here's a chance to get killed, 'stead o' going back to prison in that hell-hole!"

"No thanks for it," repeated the Bosque Kid slowly. "Just bullets in our guts."

He slipped a lean-barreled Colt from its greased holster and inspected it almost wearily. He grinned sourly, as he heard Dugan say to him:

"We're doin' it for Big Tex!"

Big Tex, however, shook his head. He was a big, fine looking fellow whom no man in the world might have known as a hunted jailbird and ex-outlaw leader, from his appearance. A fighting man, yes; a hard, dangerous fellow who was a born leader and could take men into the borders of death and bring them back cheering him wildly. But not the cringing, back-shooting outlaw type. Not Big Tex, and not his men, either!

"You ain't doin' this for me, you ain't," said Big Tex. "You're doin' it for my boy, for Little Tex!"

"Little Tex!" Dugan laughed softly. "You thinkin' of him, still, as a diaper-straddler? You fool, he's bigger'n you, likely! Don't forget, seventeen years is a long time!"

"Like I could forget!" Big Tex looked back over the past with grim-set jaws that made his face hard and stern. "Seventeen years—an eighteen year old son being whipped by a big cattle outfit. An' you think I can forget!"

The Bosque Kid said: "Once we jumped a big fellow, to right our wrongs. We got turned into outlaws, border jumpers, then jailbirds at Yuma! Now, we're a-doin' the same damn fool thing! Let's go—you crazy sons!"

"Wait!" Big Tex raised his hand and held them still. He rode out into the open from among the jack-pines, and shouted at the top of his big, roaring voice: "You, you Big Arrow buzzards! Roll your guns, you sons, we're a-ridin' you down!"

THERE was a startled, amazed silence from seven riders who were pushing a beef herd through the flats below. Then four yelling and howling riders shot out of the pines and came careening down the slopes, and guns began to roar!

Riding point for the Big Arrow beef cut, from the lower end of their ever growing range, was a man known as the Breed. The Breed was a killer, through and through, and the type of foreman that picked killers to ride with him. Now he saw four men riding down, and he had six to back him. He laughed cruelly to himself, and spun his jumping horse to meet the charge.

He was silent, except for the flat, barking sound of the short-barreled carbine he whipped up to his shoulder. He did not have to yell orders at his men; not those fellows, not the bunch that Carl Minder had hired, to clean out the Green Valley range country and have it for himself!

Like a howling thunderbolt, the Four Horsemen smashed down into that bunch of gunmen and the herd they were driving. Like lunatics, yelling and shooting, they swept through and across and up a hundred yards on the far ridge. Like crazy, shooting devils they wheeled, tore back, guns flaming and spouting!

The cattle were bawling, bellowing, fighting each other and surging into the men who had tried to hold them and fight at the same time. It was instinct, with range-bred men, to try to hold the herd as they fought. But instinct and fighting men could not hold that herd, nor the four wild riders who whirled away, reloaded and smashed back into the Big Arrow riders!

In a few frantic, wild moments the thing was over. The beef herd was split, sent wildly breaking in all directions. Two Big Arrow gunmen and killers were dead. Another was badly wounded. And the three others were struggling to get their venomously cursing foreman out from under his dead horse!

On the ridge, five hundred yards away, Four Horsemen sat their mounts and hooted gleefully. To them came the raging shout of the Breed:

"You tell that fool kid, Boucher, he ain't heard the end o' this!"

Utah, Dugan, and the Bosque Kid yelled insulting, very derogatory remarks as they wheeled and rode off. But Big Tex was silent, shaking his head. The Bosque Kid was bandaging an arm, grazed by hot lead, and Dugan was knotting his bandanna about a neat slash across his left calf. He grinned up at Big Tex, sobered a little as he saw the latter's expression.

No one spoke, but thoughts were shifting swiftly. Boucher, the Big Arrow man had said. That would be Jack Boucher, Big Tex's son—named for him, and grown up into a fighting man like his dad. They thought back over it swiftly, back to eighteen years ago when Big Tex had taken arms against the big railroad corporation that had robbed the small ranchers.

His sacrifice had been great. For Big Tex's wife had turned on him, and left him—a quick-tempered angry woman who did not approve of open warfare. And then, through the "underground" in Yuma, Big Tex got word that his wife had died.

But Mary Boucher, Big Tex's wife, had been right, it seemed. For Big Tex and the last of his men had been captured by a thin-lipped, cold-eyed U.S. Marshal and his posse. The marshal, "Whispering Pete" Johnson, had turned them over to the Territorial courts of Arizona, and grimly seen them sent to Yuma. Now they had broken out, before they had failed to right their wrongs in open warfare. Would they again fail?

CHAPTER II

Killers on the Prod

THAT night the Four Horsemen circled a small cabin that was in the center of a little basin rich with grass. Some horses were there in the corrals. Cattle drifted over the meadows and up over the ridges. But there was no sign of life at the cabin. All night the Four Horsemen watched in turn, grim, hard fellows. And when it was Big Tex's turn to watch the cabin, he stared through strangely softened eyes at it. No one there at the cabin, but it belonged to his boy, Jack Boucher.

"Likely he's in town," Big Tex said to himself. "But we'll watch the night through, so's the Big Arrow can't raid during the dark."

Here was the home of his son, whom he had last seen as a baby of one year. He wondered, a little dully, what Jack

Boucher would look like? And what he knew? What had Big Tex's wife, embittered by the terrible turn their future had taken, told his son? Had she told of how she had pleaded with Big Tex not to fight the big railroad company, in the interests of the small ranches, there in west Texas? Told the boy her side of it, and made him think of his dad as an outlaw, a killer, a jailbird?

Or didn't the boy know the truth? Had the woman that Big Tex still loved and still dreamed of, died without speaking her hate for him? If so, no use to tell his son, now. But if Jack Boucher did know about his dad's past, was there any use in telling him who these Four Horsemen were? Big Tex shook his head, there in the darkness, as he circled his son's home to watch for raiders from the Big Arrow.

"It would hurt him too much," he decided. "We'll just do what we can to help him, an' then ride out to whatever may be a-comin' to us. *If* we're still alive!"

He thought of it grimly. Back to Yuma, to surrender to whatever the law might have in store for jail-breakers. What a pity the thing had to break before their terms were up, when they could ride out honest men, and fight it out shoulder to shoulder with his son!

Instead, they were outlaws, armed and clothed and mounted with things bought with money from their old, grim days of robbing the railroad company which had robbed them first. But, still outlaws, jail-breakers, to help the boy he could not tell of his outlaw dad!

Dawn broke without raiders coming from the Big Arrow. The Four Horsemen rode down to the cabin, saw again signs of Jack Boucher having left quietly, and decided again he must be in town. They rode for town, in the brightening day, looked back from the ridge three miles away and saw a woman drive up to the little ranch house in a buckboard. She stepped down, tied the team, and went into the cabin. Soon smoke came from the chimney.

"Got somebody to clean an' cook for him, likely," said Big Tex, and then led the way onward toward town.

The Four Horsemen rode into the little cowtown of Green Valley, unshaven, dusty, but bright-eyed and hard-lipped as they grinned warily and wondered what the town marshal might know about four men who had broken out of Yuma? They were seven hundred miles from Yuma, and had crossed all of one state, part of another. But the hand of the law is far reaching, and the Four Horsemen knew it.

BIG TEX led the way as they ground-tied their horses, split reins dragging for a quick mount and getaway. He led them straight into the saloon, whose sign announced in straggling, lop-sided letters which had been painted with soot and linseed oil: SHORT GRASS'S PLACE.

"Short Grass, huh? Betcha he came from Texas," said Bosque. "Wonder if he knows us?"

"Texas is a big place," grinned Dugan. "We're in Colorado, now—an' if'n he or anybody else knows us, it's just their danged hard luck!"

They were in the dimly seen saloon interior, now. It was noon, not much going on, just a few men talking over an empty card table, and the bartender polishing glasses. He shoved out beer bottles, without glasses, to their requests, and turned away with the money. Big Tex was listening, beer held halfway to his heat-split lips.

A man was saying: "Yeah, sure, Jack. I'm the law, town marshal an' deputy sheriff for this western end o' hades we call Green Valley. I'll do what I can, if'n there's trouble. But how can I help you now?"

Jack Boucher nodded slowly, smiling a little. He was almost nineteen years old, but looked a little older. There were tired lines about his lips, and deep wrinkles at his eyes as he smiled. He was a big fellow, a full

six feet four inches, and must have weighed two hundred and ten pounds, at least. But somehow, he looked as agile and dangerous as a big puma, crouched for a spring. Yet his voice was kindly, soft, as he answered the lawman.

"I ain't beggin' for help, Chuck," said Jack Boucher. "I'm askin' a fair break for the little ranchers, who're being ground out o' this range. I'm askin' for—justice."

Chuck Barnder sighed, and waved his hands helplessly.

"Bring me proof o' anything the law can act on," he said. "Then I'll get you all the justice the courts've got in their books!" He slapped Jack Boucher on the shoulder, offered cheerfully: "Have a drink!"

Jack Boucher nodded, ordered beer and drank it slowly. Big Tex had a strangely drawn look on his face as he looked at the young fellow. He was seeing it all again, living it all again—little man fighting big. Fate repeats itself, often. Was fate going to send his boy over his own trail?

Big Tex whispered something to Dugan; something about: "I'll talk an' hold 'em here. You go to the lawman's office an' see what you can find there."

Dugan gulped his beer, lurched around and pattered his high heels out into the street and silence. Big Tex moved closer, staring almost hungrily at his son—seventeen years.

But he said, to an intently staring lawman: "Lookin' for me, lawman?"

Chuck Barnder studied Big Tex; then shifted his gaze to Utah and the Bosque Kid.

He suddenly grinned, said: "Tough, plenty tough! Nope, Mister, I ain't lookin' for you—right now. An' I'm sure hopin' I don't have to go lookin' for you! You look like tough gents. Where in hell you break out from?"

UTAH and Bosque both put down their beer bottles and wiped their palms on their shirts. That last sounded like trouble, gunplay, to them. Break out, huh! They thought: "What does that lawman know about us?"

"That's the place!" Big Tex boomed out a great laugh with his words: "Hell, that's the place we come from! Hell's got sand an' no water, an' tortures, an' things like that. Sure, that's where we broke out of. Hell—that's us, Mister Lawman, Four Horsemen from Hell!"

He roared with big, deep-voiced laughter. Utah laughed, Bosque grinned sourly, and the bartender laughed. Then the lawman laughed, and Jack Boucher chuckled deeply as he looked at this big, booming-voiced man who stood as tall and as straight as he did.

"Four Horsemen from Hell," said Jack Boucher, as the laugh still lingered. "Well, you came to a good place, Mister. It may remind you of home, if the Big Arrow don't quit pickin' on some little ranchers around here. Yes, sir!"

He nodded, turned and walked toward the door, wide shoulders moving with an easy swing. Gun swinging low, boots tapping lightly, swift and lithe, he went out. A man, a real man, even at eighteen years of age—a real, hard riding, fighting man. A son to be proud of!

Big Tex opened his mouth to ask the lawman to have a drink. He wanted Dugan to have plenty of time, in what he was doing. But the words went unsaid, as Big Tex snapped his jaw shut and wheeled to jump for the still swinging doors. He beat the lawman, beat even Utah and Bosque, who were closer, and had heard the angry, challenging words from some hard-voiced fellow in the street outside.

"Boucher, you had your men raid that beef herd an' kill some o' my crew!" It was the venomous man known as the Breed. "I'll l'arn you. Draw, you son!"

And the guns roared before even Big Tex could reach the street. Just two, flat-sounding shots—and silence. Big Tex went a little sick inside, as he dove through the door, gun in hand.

He visioned his boy, whom he had seen for the first time in seventeen years, lying in the street. He crashed out, skidded to a stop, with Utah, Bosque, and the marshal close behind him.

There, standing flat-footed, calm and quiet, was Jack Boucher. He turned now, smiled quietly to the marshal, and said:

"Chuck Barnder, you heard, inside?"

Barnder nodded, and waved his hands. He looked at one of the fastest gunmen he had ever known of—dead in the street. Killed by this eighteen year old who had just shot down his first man, and could smile with quiet, unflurried nerves!

Dugan was coming across the street, grinning widely. He kept quiet, as Barnder said there was no reason for Jack Boucher to remain. It was a fair fight, brought on by the dead man. A burial was all that was needed now, Jack Boucher nodded and moved to his horse. He thumbed the spent shell out of his gun, thumbed another in, and reholstered it. Then he mounted, with easy swing, and rode off down the street.

"Tex," Dugan was whispering. "Damn it, Tex, you'd 'a' loved it when that boy o' yours drew! Pretty! Just that little snap, like you use! Y'know, just kinda pointin' your finger-like! Man, Tex, you should 'a' seen your boy!"

BARNDER had picked up the dead Breed easily, and now walked off with the body of the killer over his shoulder. Later, Big Tex was to know that he could like that smiling lawman, could fight with him—and for him. But now, he was smiling as he watched his son ride off down the street and swing toward the open range. Then he looked down, as Dugan put something in his hand. A piece of paper. Unfolded, Big Tex caught something about a thousand dollar reward, for four men who had broken out of Yuma!

He crumpled the paper, jammed it in his pocket as he watched his son ride out into the open range country that bordered the little, sleepy cattle town of Green Valley.

"I found that, in the marshal's office," said Dugan, in a low whisper. "It's the only one—"

"Then nobody'll know us," said Bosque slowly. "We can stay, an' fight—"

Dugan shook his head, and they saw a worried look on his usually smiling face.

"Whisperin' Pete is here," he said. "I seen him goin' down the street!"

Whispering Pete. It hit them like a bullet in the chest—that name. Whispering Pete Johnson, the thin-lipped, cold-eyed U.S. Marshal who had jailed them fifteen years back!

"Maybe he knows we're here," said Utah.

"Maybe if'n we find him, talk to him, tell him what we did it for—" Dugan spoke in almost a moan. "He's a square lawman— he fights fair. He'll give us a break to help that boy o' yours, Tex, if'n we talk to him—"

"Shut up!" Big Tex snapped the words. "Look!"

He pointed out into the open country, about a mile away from them. A hard racing cowboy had jerked his mount to a dead stop beside Jack Boucher. For not more than two seconds the two riders were still. Then the cowboy came tearing on for town, and Jack Boucher spurred off in a wild race that raised clouds of dust behind his fleet horse.

Like four automatons, the Four Horsemen jumped for their mounts, hit the saddles, and hammered off. By the time they reached the end of the street, the cowboy was pulling his horse to a dead stop, at a small cottage. To Big Tex's quick question of what was wrong, he answered:

"I told Jack I seen Carl Minder, a-headin' for his cabin. My boss sent me in to tell him, an' to bring out some cartridges."

"War," said Big Tex. "War—an'

we got to get to Jack before Minder's killers nail him!"

And the Four Horsemen from Hell went hammering out after Jack Boucher, all thought of the U.S. Marshal, Whispering Pete, driven from their minds.

CHAPTER III

.45 FOURSOME

BUT catching Jack Boucher was something else again. For the Four Horsemen had lost time in getting their horses, and also in talking to the cowboy who had warned young Boucher of his peril. The Four Horsemen were almost two miles behind Boucher, and their horses had done more work than his. But they rode hard, slanting forward in their saddles, eyes forward, scanning the hills and ridges for possible ambush.

It was a full two hours' hard riding to Jack Boucher's ranch, and the young fellow had increased his lead another mile by the time he reached the house. From a distance, the Four Horsemen could see the buckboard still standing near the door, but the team was in the corral. Three saddle horses, however, were there by the ranch house, as Jack Boucher slid his horse to a stop, and disappeared into the house on the run.

As the Four Horsemen reached the trees, a couple of hundred yards from the cabin, they could see men inside talking earnestly. Then two men stepped out, a third followed, and Jack Boucher himself appeared, talking rapidly, earnestly. Grimly, the Four Horsemen sent their horses pounding up to the group, and slid them to a stop. As they did so, four pairs of eyes turned on them, with startled gaze. Jack Boucher alone grinned, though faintly, and then started a little as Big Tex said:

"If'n you're here for trouble, count us four on Boucher's side, gents!"

"Easy, Minder," said Jack Boucher slowly. "Don't start anything here!"

The man he spoke to, Carl Minder, made a gesture to his men not to draw, and stared coldly at the Four Horsemen. He was a jowly-faced fellow of about forty, just Big Tex's age, but looked many years older. His hair and stubby beard were graying, and his face had long, deep lines in it. He was an unpleasant, rough-voiced man. A domineering, driving fellow who was spreading his range over several counties, and would stop at nothing, robbery, death—murder—to further his ends.

"Don't think I know you, gents," said Minder coldly. "But my rider here, Sam, says my beef cut was raided by four men."

The Bosque Kid's eyes were little slits in his dark face, and his thin lips twisted a little. Here, in Carl Minder, he was seeing a page from his past, twenty years back, before he had met Big Tex. Minder didn't know the Bosque Kid, he had said. But the Kid sure as shooting knew Minder—and wondered if he could not put that knowledge to some profit, right soon.

"I just can't figure who them four riders could've been." Big Tex boomed his words out mockingly. "Sure funny, four gents having the guts to raid the Big Arrow herd!"

The cowboy known as Sam made a jerk for his gun, his eyes blazing rage.

"I'd know that voice anywhere," he shouted. "That's the bunch, boss!"

Like four smooth working parts of one deadly fighting machine, the Four Horsemen drew and leveled pistols. The cowboy, Sam, gulped and did not finish his draw.

Jack Boucher chuckled, said: "Minder, I didn't hire these men to raid your herd—I told you that, a few minutes ago. But—I wish I could hire them!"

A WOMAN had appeared in the doorway, was standing with a clenched hand at her mouth, staring at the group. No one looked at her. It was no time to take their eyes off

each other, for bullets might start their death song at any moment.

Jack Boucher stood before Minder, and said slowly: "You're a yellow dog, Minder. You hired gunmen to crowd your way into this range, where five of us was tryin' to make good as ranchers in our small way. You crowded in, with bullets an' trouble. You've lied, you've made waterholes dangerous to use, you've raided our herds an' our homes. An' now you bellyache o' gettin' the law on me when somebody comes in an' raids your herd an' your hired killers!"

"I came here," blustered Minder, "to try an' talk you into a peaceable settlement o' that raid! I lost cattle, I lost men, an' you gotta pay for it. I asked you, right now, an' I get war talk for an answer. All right—it's war!"

Jack Boucher snorted derisively. He was not quite nineteen, but there was nothing boyish or uncertain about him as he faced a powerful and dangerous enemy.

"Rats to that! It's been war for months—dirty war, the kind you an' your killers make. If we could only prove some o' the things that've been done to us at your orders!"

Minder did not answer. He got on his horse, nodded to his two men, and all three rode away. None looked back. The Bosque Kid was staring after Minder with a very questioning, speculative stare, but Dugan and Utah were chuckling at each other. Then all three wheeled, as they heard a choked sound from Big Tex. As the three turned to look at Big Tex, they saw him standing like a statue of stunned amazement, staring at the woman in the doorway. And her white-lipped face was turned to the Four Horsemen from Hell, as Jack Boucher said:

"Gents, I don't know your names, but this is my mother!"

"Howdy, ma'am."

The Four Horsemen spoke as one. Now no one would have guessed that they were staring at a woman they had believed dead, Big Tex's wife, and Jack Boucher's mother. Word had come to Big Tex in Yuma, that his wife had died; the same reliable source that had later sent his word of his son's trouble. But now the Four Horsemen were staring at Big Tex's wife in the living flesh, and hearing her say:

"My boy, take your horse to the stable and grain him, after that hard ride."

Jack Boucher nodded, said: "You gents are stayin' to supper. I can't pay you wages for what you did to Minder, but I sure as shootin' wish I could!"

HE walked away with his horse, and the group at the door was silent as he left. Then Big Tex broke the silence.

"Mary, I heard you were dead—"

Her face was a frozen mask, and she answered in a low voice: "Yes, I wanted you to hear that. I wanted my boy to grow up without any chance to know his father was a thief, a train robber, a murderer!"

Big Tex shook his head sadly. "All but the last, Mary—not a murderer, ever!"

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, coldly ignoring his words.

Big Tex explained quietly, that word had come to him of the trouble his boy, Jack, was having; and of how they had broken out of Yuma, and come to Jack's aid.

"He doesn't need it, won't take it!" She flung the words at him bitterly. "You left me, you got into trouble with the law. Now, when your boy has grown up to manhood, without his knowing or the people knowing what his father is and was, you come back!"

"But, Mary—"

"Go away—we never want help from your kind! Not decent people!"

In a fury, Mrs. Boucher obviously was saying things, bitter things, that she might not have said at another time. And Big Tex knew it. He

grinned a little, his face level with hers as she stood in the doorway above him.

"Mary, I've always loved you, always will!"

She swayed a little, stiffened.

"You sure got a quick temper, Mary!" Big Tex chuckled a little. "You let it part us, once, when it might've helped to have you backin' me. You maybe mean you don't want my help—but by the heavens above, Mary, neither you nor any man or power on this earth can keep me from helpin' my boy!"

"You—" she gasped the single word, in a strange voice.

"Mary—darlin'—" Big Tex stepped forward, reached out his hand toward her.

She jerked away from him. A cold hard voice, following the metallic click of a cocking pistol, said: "Lay off, damn you!"

It was Jack Boucher, standing flat-footed at the corner of the house, gun in hand. The high words had drawn him, had him white-lipped, cold, gun on Big Tex as he went on: "Git! Git the hell outa here, you polecats. Don't you dare to bother my mother!"

He said some more, some very unpleasant things about the men who had come to help him, and said them all over the muzzle of his Colt. Big Tex and the three with him took the words without change of expression, knowing all the time that one word of explanation from Big Tex would clear the thing. But Big Tex did not say that word. For to say it would have meant telling Jack Boucher that his dad was an escaped convict. And what effect, what good, would come of that? Big Tex and the three backed to their horses.

"We came to help you an' your mother—not to make trouble," Big Tex said quietly.

"Get out, get goin'," said Jack Boucher, utterly unafraid of the Four Horsemen from Hell. "Get goin', I say!"

Big Tex went on, as though he hadn't heard. But how he did admire that boy of his!

"I was sayin'," said Big Tex, "misunderstandin's do make trouble. But we come here to help you—an' we will!"

CHAPTER IV

Star-Toter's Deadline

THE Four Horsemen from Hell kept a close watch on the Boucher ranch that night, but nothing happened. Next day they rode into Green Valley, and purchased supplies for at least a week. These they rammed into saddle pockets and a gunny-sack each, and rode out of town. All the time they were warily watching for Minder, or his men, or any trouble that he might make. They kept watch over the Boucher ranch again that night, but Minder's men made no trouble.

Then, on the third night, when Big Tex was watching the Boucher ranch house at about midnight, he heard a low whistling sound, very much like the sound of a small owl. He answered it, went two hundred yards over the ridge to their camp, and found Dugan and the others staring down to a point of flame about ten miles away.

"Looks like we watched the wrong ranch," said Big Tex. "That's the home of the rancher we talked to yesterday. The Bar Z gent, who was ready to sell out to Minder, but changed his mind when trouble started!"

"Shall we ride?" said Utah, his palms beginning to itch as he thought of guns and shooting. "Huh?"

But Big Tex shook his head. "We couldn't get there in time to help, an' they may raid some place else tonight. I'll go back on watch."

He turned, started to walk—and suddenly made a dive at something in the shadows. They all heard a grunt, a curse, and the thud of a blow. Then Big Tex stood up, holding a limp man in his arms.

"Thought I'd seen somethin' move there," said Big Tex with a grin, as

he walked toward them carrying his victim. "A spy for Minder, likely. We'll wake him up an' make him talk—"

He stopped short, staring at his man, for the Bosque Kid had thrown small branches on the fire, and there was light enough to see faces:

"Whisperin' Pete—the lawman!"

For a long moment, after Big Tex put the U.S. Marshal on the ground, the Four Horsemen stared at each other helplessly. Whispering Pete had been watching them. What did it mean, immediate capture and return to that hell-hole at Yuma?

Whispering Pete stirred, sat up, and looked at Big Tex with a twisted grin.

"You're fast for a big man, Tex," he said quietly. "An' prison ain't slowed you down any!"

Nobody spoke as the lawman rolled a smoke and started it from a small twig picked off the fire. Then the lawman spoke through curling spirals of smoke.

"I figured you'd come here, where your boy was, Tex."

"Listen, Pete," Tex spoke solemnly. "I broke jail, yes. I brought the boys here with me, yes. But we came to get my boy out o' trouble. You always had the rep o' bein' square, Pete. Let us alone until this is straightened out, an' we'll go back to Yuma with you."

Whispering Pete puffed smoke, said nothing as he looked attentively at the fire.

Big Tex's hand clenched, and he said: "You'll do what I ask, or else—"

The U.S. Marshal looked at four hard-eyed outlaws who ringed him, and said slowly, mockingly: "Or else —what?"

"You won't be in any position to make trouble for us, or nobody else!" The hard, menacing words came from Big Tex himself. "Get it?"

"Yeah, I get it!" Whispering Pete laughed. "Big Tex, you can't bluff me. Neither you, nor these three hellions with you. I know you—you never harmed a man in your life, except in a fair fight, Tex. You couldn't make good on that bluff o' yours, if you died for it."

Big Tex stepped forward, said coldly: "Pete, before I was fightin' for myself. Now, I'm fightin' for my boy. It'll be tough for you or anybody else that breaks into this fight on the wrong side."

THERE was a long silence when this was said, and Whispering Pete was the man that broke it. He stood up, dusted his pants and grinned. Then he shoved out a hand and said:

"I reckon you mean that, Tex—shake!" Then he went on: "I heard what you an' your wife said—I was hidin' out in their attic to get the goods on this mess here in Green Valley. I think I know the truth, but I ain't sure yet. I'm sure, though, that you mean what you say. I'll give you two weeks, Tex. Then if this ain't straightened out, you all four go back to Yuma!"

"Two weeks ain't a lot to break up a range war," said Dugan slowly. "But we got somethin' to fight for!"

"I'm on your side, for a while anyhow," said Whispering Pete. "I think I used to know this man Minder. An' if he's the man I think he is, he'll be mighty hard to beat. Mighty hard, gents!"

He nodded to them, said again: "Two weeks, to Yuma, boys!"

And he walked off into the darkness. A few moments later they heard the clatter of a horse trotting down the ridge.

THE next ten days were hard ones for the Four Horsemen, but hardest of all for Big Tex. Twice they were ambushed, in riding about the range country. And once they were very nearly led into a trap which would have left them holding the sack for a brutal murder. Carl Minder arranged that, with his tricky cunning, and one of his own riders was the victim.

But Big Tex was too smart for him, and managed to keep clear of the

tricky thing Minder had arranged. That the Four Horsemen were to be found at the body of his rider, by himself and what little law there seemed to be around, Chuck Barnder.

Those things, however, were not the really hard part for Big Tex. It was seeing his son, and not being able to tell the boy who he was; and of seeing his own son ride past him when they met, with only a cold stare. Those things, coupled with the fact that Whispering Pete, who seemed to have disappeared completely, had given them two weeks. And now ten days of it had passed, without any sign of their being able to do more than take chances on being recognized as outlaws, or being killed in a Minder ambush.

These things were in the minds of the Four Horsemen all the time, it seemed. And Dugan at last said, that evening of the tenth day as they lounged about a hidden camp, waiting until darkness came to go and watch over the Boucher ranch:

"Let's go kill that son, Minder!" Dugan's voice was cold, as he smiled in his soft way. "That'll end it. Kill the son! Gun him an' bury him under six feet o' rocks!"

"We can't," said Big Tex; though his palms itched to grab guns to kill Minder. "We can't do it that way. It won't straighten out the thing—an' it leaves us murderers. He's too smart to give us a break to fight him fair. It'll be murder if we get him."

They stared at each other, grunted, smoked. Something was on the Bosque Kid's mind, it seemed, for he didn't talk.

He rose, said quietly: "I'll take the first watch, to see that Minder's men don't raid the ranch."

He left, and it wasn't until an hour later that Big Tex realized something was wrong. The Bosque Kid had taken his saddle horse!

Big Tex came to his feet, and ran for his own horse, with Utah and Dugan running also and asking questions. Big Tex, however, couldn't answer those questions until he reached his horse. Then he could, for there in the saddle was a note, which he read by the light of a match:

I'm goin' to see Minder. If I don't get back I'll see you buzzards in hell!

CHAPTER V

First Blood

BIG TEX was in the saddle now. His big horse plunged forward in great leaps, into the darkness about them. He did not have to yell orders at Dugan and Utah. For all knew what Big Tex was going to do, and where he was going to do it. They hit the saddles with a thud, and went plunging after Big Tex.

Dugan felt his saddle was loose, and riding at full speed, kept his balance as he bent over and caught at the end of the latigo. He pulled, pulled again, and then shifted his weight slightly. The saddle held, and he twisted the latigo end through the ring twice and jerked it down hard. Then he was riding straight again.

For two long hours the three riders hammered forward, straight for the headquarters of Carl Minder's Big Arrow spread. Big Tex rode grimly, his lips drawn. The Bosque Kid had been his cell-mate at Yuma, much of the time. And he had grown to like the slim, dark rider with a feeling that was as intense as brotherly love.

Dugan and Utah shared those feelings, but somehow the dark, quarrelsome and grumbling Texan was tops with Big Tex, and Big Tex hated to think of the Bosque Kid riding into hell alone. For that seemed just what would happen to him, at the Big Arrow headquarters.

Certainly, it seemed madness to think that one man could ride into Carl Minder's gun-slinging crew, and come out alive. Maybe, thought Big Tex, the Bosque Kid didn't want to come out alive. Maybe he was thinking of those damp, hot stone cells at Yuma

—and preferred death to going back.

It was midnight when the silent three came up to the headquarters outfit of the Big Arrow. Dimly, they could see dark bunkhouses, darker barns and sheds, with big corrals sweeping about in huge rings. And close to them, as they rode out of the clumped jack-pines, they could see the sprawling outlines of the main ranch house, dark except for one window. In the slanting beam of that window, they could see the silhouette of a horse, saddle empty.

They pulled their horses down to a silent jog-trot, and drew their pistols. Grimly, they rode on, to what they did not know. But that horse looked like the big bay which the Bosque Kid had been riding. On they went, closer, closer—and then a sudden, crashing shot sent them surging forward.

That shot was repeated twice. A yell sounded from the house. More yells and more shots came crashing from the nearest bunkhouse. The three riders were shooting now, and into the mad crashing roars came the bellowing voice of Big Tex.

"Bosky? Bosky?"

They caught a glimpse of a slim figure plunging out of the lighted window. The slim figure stumbled, plunging forward toward the horse. He was down—up. Somebody was shooting from the window, and it looked like Carl Minder. Big Tex was swearing now, as his horse buck-jumped forward as he spurred it.

He shouted, with a yell of joy: "At-a boy, Bosky!"

Bosky was on his feet now, leaping for his horse. He was in the saddle, spurring, wheeling, racing around toward them. And all were in a wild hail of lead thrown from the house and bunkhouse, as they obeyed the Bosque Kid's yelling order:

"Come on, you buzzards from hell, ride!"

No one questioned, no one stopped to fire another shot. Even Big Tex himself, always the boss-man of the crew, wheeled and raced off into the darkness after the Bosque Kid. That voice meant something mighty big was up in the wind, tonight!

The Bosque Kid rode in the lead now, crashing through in a straight line due west. That straight line, in ten miles of hard riding, would put them close to the Jack Boucher ranch house.

Big Tex spurred, caught up with the Bosque Kid, and said: "What is it, Bosky?"

"Hell breakin' loose," said the Bosque Kid thickly: "Minder's sent some men—to knock Mary an' Jack over the head—burn the ranch house over 'em, like it was an accident. He's found who we are—one o' his men recognized you. They heard us talkin' one night—know Jack's your boy."

He was talking very jerkily, and Big Tex put it down to the hammering of their horses. And then—the Bosque Kid swayed, went reeling out of the saddle to plunge headlong to the ground. Big Tex groaned, cursed, as he spun his horse and made a running dismount right at the Bosque Kid's limp body. He picked him up, held the Kid and wiped dust from his lips.

The Bosque Kid grinned weakly, said in a low whisper: "Didn't want —to stop—you ridin'. Minder gut-shotted—me. Get him, after—you save Mary an' Jack. He—tell Pete that—"

He stopped—they thought him dead. But his eyes opened, and he spoke again, with tremendous effort.

"Tell—Pete—Minder—"

Again his voice died away. They waited, those three grim and hard men, with tears in their eyes. Something mighty big that the Bosque Kid was trying to tell them. Something about Minder—something that might help the whole thing clear up. And then came a choked sound.

"Ugh—see you—in hell."

And the Bosque Kid died in Big Tex's arms.

THEY looked at each other helplessly. Then Big Tex said in a very low voice: "We'll put him in the

fork o' that pine, an' come back to bury him later."

They did that, and rode on. It was nearly an hour later when they closed in on the small ranch house that held all Big Tex loved in the whole world —his wife and son. His wife seemed to hate him. His own son—though unknowingly—had driven him from the house at the point of gun. Yet Big Tex and his two surviving friends of many years were there to protect and aid them.

Not a sound. Not a light or sign of life about the small cabin. Big Tex sighed with relief, for it seemed that Minder's men had not struck yet. They crept in closer, dismounted and moved forward on foot. They grinned thinly and crookedly at each other. What a jolt Minder's killers were going to get when they arrived and met Big Tex and his men!

Then a swift riding man broke through the tree line and sped straight as an arrow for the ranch house. Big Tex raised his gun, felt the trigger and made ready for a shot. But no one else followed that lone rider!

The lone rider hit the ground on the run, and plunged forward toward the door of the house. He was calling out, as he ran and forced open the door.

"Mother — mother, are you all right?"

As Jack Boucher disappeared into the house, silence was the only answer. A light flamed, as Jack Boucher struck a match and touched it to the wick of a lamp. Big Tex was running then, with a choked feeling in his throat. His men followed, swearing softly. They had the answer to that silence, even as they ran. They were too late. Minder's men had struck, in the absence of Jack Boucher!

As Big Tex broke into the room, where the light now was fairly bright, Jack Boucher had his back to the door. That fact alone saved Big Tex's life. The big fellow had holstered his gun as he had run toward the house, forgetful of all but the danger and death

that might have come to Mary. Now, as he burst into the room, Jack Boucher wheeled, dropping a note he held in his hand. And that same right hand dropped in an amazingly speedy draw!

"Dawn you—what have you done to my mother?"

Jack Boucher's gun roared into the words, as he fired at Big Tex—his own father!

Only Big Tex's realization, as his boy turned, that Jack was going to shoot, and that second spent in turning and drawing, saved his life. He moved like a cat, sweeping forward in a plunging dive at his son's waistline. He hit Jack like a hammer-blow, sent him smashing backwards with all his breath driven from his lungs.

As father and son smashed into the nearest chair, went piling over it and down to the floor, the heavy impact set Jack's gun flying from his hand. The rest was a wild two seconds of driving fists, lunging, swearing, and then Big Tex, Dugan and Utah held Jack Boucher a prisoner.

"Steady, boy," said Big Tex. There was something very commanding, very strong, in that big deep voice of his. "We're here to help you!"

"Took all three to hold that—" Dugan was grinning. He stopped short before he spilled the fact that Jack Boucher was Big Tex's son. "Well, he's a fightin' fool, Big Tex!"

JACK BOUCHER stared at the three men. His eyes were hot with anger, his face twisted a little with the fear that was in his heart as he said heavily:

"What've you done to my mother, damn you?"

Big Tex picked up the note, read it aloud swiftly:

We got your mother. Now—behave.

"An' they signed it, 'The Four Horsemen'—meanin' us!" Big Tex told them grimly.

"Minder's work!" Dugan snapped out, grinning thinly. "Throwin' it on us, the sucker!"

"But it don't make sense," said Utah, puffing smoke from a freshly rolled cigarette. "Bosky said that Minder knowed us. He knows nobody'd believe you'd kidnap your own wife, Big Tex!"

"You—"

Big Tex stopped. But it was too late, the harm was done.

"Your wife—my mother—good Lord!"

Jack Boucher stared at Big Tex. Over him came the dull realization, the sickening sense of something very dreadful.

"She said you were escaped thieves, murderers!" His voice was choking, as he said: "An' you say—you're my dad!"

Big Tex nodded slowly, his rich, dark eyes fixed on his son's face. His boy was going to turn from him now. Was he going to believe all the hard things Mary, his wife, had said about him in her bitterness? Big Tex, then, might have told his side of it—of how he had tried to aid small ranchers against a big railroad company, and become an outlaw through that fact alone. But he did not.

Somehow, making the boy understand did not seem very important. He was the boy's father, the boy was in trouble, his mother—Tex's wife—was in more desperate trouble. All Big Tex wanted to do was to help them, not to alibi his own past!

"All right, son," Big Tex told him quietly. "I don't blame you for not wantin' to have me for a dad. You've got your mother's side, an' that's okay by me."

Dugan and Utah stood heavily. They were wondering why Jack Boucher couldn't throw his arms about that big, fine looking man who stood and smiled, as he took the hell of silence that came from his son.

"*Bueno,* son," said Big Tex. "You go to rouse the ranchers, an' we three'll ride alone to see if we can help your mother."

Big Tex said that, and there still was silence. Jack Boucher was staring

at this big man he knew as outlaw, murderer. He bit his lip. Then, steadily, but with a rush, words came.

"You—you big, fightin' hellion! Me, leave you now? Not on your life!" Jack Boucher almost yelled his words. "We don't need help! We ride together, we do!"

Big Tex choked, and his eyes stung, as his son's arms went around him in a bear hug that almost crushed him. Then, shouting, laughing, to cover their deep emotions, all four yelled as one man:

"Minder, here we come — Four Horsemen from Hell!"

CHAPTER VI

Gun Dawn for Drygulchers

NOT once, but a hundred times in that two hours' ride to the Minder ranch headquarters, Big Tex looked at his son and felt a strange and powerful surge of emotion. He, riding with his own son at his side, to rescue someone very dear to them both. And each time he looked over, he found his boy looking at him, and grinning happily. Father and son, riding together, shoulder to shoulder!

Yet, as Big Tex knew, when the thing was over and if he still lived, he would lose his son. For he would leave that boy with Mary, who hated him, and go back to the hell-hole from which he had escaped to help them—Yuma.

The first gray hint of dawn was breaking as the Four Horsemen swept up to the clearing about the Big Arrow ranch headquarters. Silence greeted them, yet there were six saddled horses tied to the hitchrack in front of the big house. No one, however, showed on the porch at the front and side, nor at the bunkhouses in the rear.

Big Tex stopped them at the edge of the clearing and looked things over. His face was grim, hard, and no one spoke to him. Even Jack Boucher, who was seeing him clearly for the first time as his father, sensed the power and the will to command that was in the man known as Big Tex. There was strength, there was will indomitable, and courage such as was given to few men, in Big Tex. And all read it there, waited, wondered if he could see a way out of this situation.

On the ride over, Jack Boucher had told Big Tex and the others how it was that he had not been at the ranch house when his mother had been kidnapped. Word had come for him to meet Seth Jeffers at the other small rancher's house. Jack had gone there,

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and found Seth Jeffers was not there. In fact, no one was there at the Jeffers' ranch, not even his kid son who worked as his horse wrangler.

Something very definitely was scheduled for that night, Big Tex had decided. Probably Minder's final smash to wreck the small cattlemen of the Green Valley, and the small ranchers were gathering to fight.

And now, as dawn broke, Big Tex made his swift and final decision.

"Dugan, you an' Utah line up the bunkhouses with your rifles. Don't let anybody come out—alive. But I'm thinkin', somehow, that there ain't many o' Minder's gunnies here. They're out some'res, raisin' the hell he's hired 'em to do!"

"An' us, Dad?" Jack said it with a smile, knowing how that word, dad, affected them both. "What do we do?"

Big Tex looked at his son, a swift smile breaking over his fine face. Here was a son to be proud of; matching him inch by inch in height, pound by pound in weight, and with all his father's fine courage and fighting ability. Was it any wonder then, that Big Tex smiled? Smiled and said:

"Son, I'm thinkin' we're goin' to find your mother!"

HE nodded. Dugan and Utah sent their horses around to one side, where they could cover both front and rear of the big bunkhouses. Then Big Tex moved out toward the house, in plain sight, and yelled:

"Minder! Minder! We want to talk to you!"

Silence held them all for a few moments. Into it, though none of them noticed it at the time, there came a distant sound, oddly like someone breaking small, dry sticks. Then Big Tex roared his words again, and again no answer came. He turned to his son, Jack, and started to ask:

"What shall we—"

Jack interrupted, pointing toward the house with a yell of delight: "Mother!" He shouted it again: "Mother—here we are!"

There was something in his voice that told Mrs. Boucher and the man in back of her, Carl Minder, that the boy knew the truth. Mrs. Boucher felt the heavy gun at her back waver, then draw away. She turned coldly, her face severe and stern, and her voice steady.

"Don't shoot them! I'll do what you say, to save their lives!"

Minder grinned maliciously. He nodded, said to three men who were with him: "You know what to do, boys!"

They nodded, grinned back, and walked out. Carl Minder had it pretty well figured out. His men were raiding the small ranchers, making things pretty hot for them, he knew. And he knew that the Bosque Kid was dead. He had three men there, about six or seven in the bunkhouse; and Mrs. Boucher in his hands. By the time his scheme had worked out, in the next few minutes, he would be safe. He nodded to her, and pointed out the window.

She nodded, turned and called: "Minder says that, *to save my life*, you three outlaws must give yourselves up to him, to go back to Yuma! That you, Jack, my son—must persuade the ranchers to get out of this range!"

There was a dead silence, and into that dead silence came Mrs. Boucher's voice again. But this time it had lost its cold, flat tones, and was a wild, emotional shout.

"Jack—*Big Tex*—come and get me!"

And with that she wheeled from the window.

Outside, after that first stunned fraction of a second following Mrs. Boucher's call to her son and her husband, a wild roar came from Big Tex.

"Le's go—son!"

He knew then what Mary Boucher had meant by that call. And nothing in the world other than death could have stopped his wild, driving, bullet-slinging rush to get to his wife before harm could come to her. Side by side, Big Tex and Jack drove forward, guns

flaming. They saw only Carl Minder now, alone at the window throwing lead at them. They knew that other men were shooting at them, but ignored it. Only that one face, that one thought, Minder, and to keep him from further chance to harm Mary Boucher!

ABOUT sixty feet from the porch, Jack's horse stumbled and rolled heavily. Caught, with one leg under the dead animal, Jack came twisting around. He began to shoot over the saddle at ducking men he could see in the nearest windows.

He yelled: "Go get 'em, Dad!"

Big Tex roared back, as he hit the ground and began a wild leaping up over the steps to the porch. Somebody was slamming some lead at him, from an angle down the porch. He ignored it, twirled his gun cylinder and thumbed fresh shells into it. Big Tex could see Carl Minder now. He jerked up his gun, threw three quick shots, and let his rush carry him in a dive through the open window. His huge body hit Carl Minder's, and sent them both to the floor.

"Mary? Mary, darlin'—"

Big Tex came to his feet, plunged across the room, leaving Minder a limp heap on the floor behind him. Outside, as Big Tex crashed across the room, there was a sudden quickening of the shots—more and more, louder and louder. It seemed that at least a hundred men must be shooting out there. But Big Tex saw only the limp figure in the corner, Mary, his wife.

He caught her in his arms, held her, and then saw the ugly bruise where Carl Minder had thrown her against the wall. Her eyes opened, stared at him for a long moment, then one slender hand rose to his cheek.

"Tex," she whispered. "Big Tex—my Tex!"

As their lips met, for the first time in seventeen years, Jack came diving through the window.

He yelled excitedly: "Whisperin' Pete, the lawman—got the Minder gunnies on the run—all the ranchers with him—" He stopped short, grinned widely, and went on: "So, go right ahead, Dad, we'll finish this without you!"

Big Tex and his wife laughed, stood up with their arms about each other. And, without them, the fight was finished in a very few moments, with all of Minder's men in the hands of the law, or pretty well shot to pieces.

Then, on the porch, Dugan and Utah and Big Tex stood facing Whispering Pete, the lawman who had jailed them once before. The lawman was talking, in his dry way.

"Back to Yuma, boys," he said slowly. "But I'm goin' to tell the governor that you helped me clean out this nest of Minder's an' his outlaw crew. He had a murder record in Texas years back. He'd made good in the ranchin' game, but he wasn't the kind to ever go straight—him an' his rustlin', murderin' crew. You'll have a lot o' company at Yuma—you buzzards!"

"Don't rub it in, Pete!" Big Tex spoke evenly. "You know how I got on the outlaw trails, how Dugan an' the others stuck by me. Don't rub it in, now we're losin' again!"

Whispering Pete laughed softly.

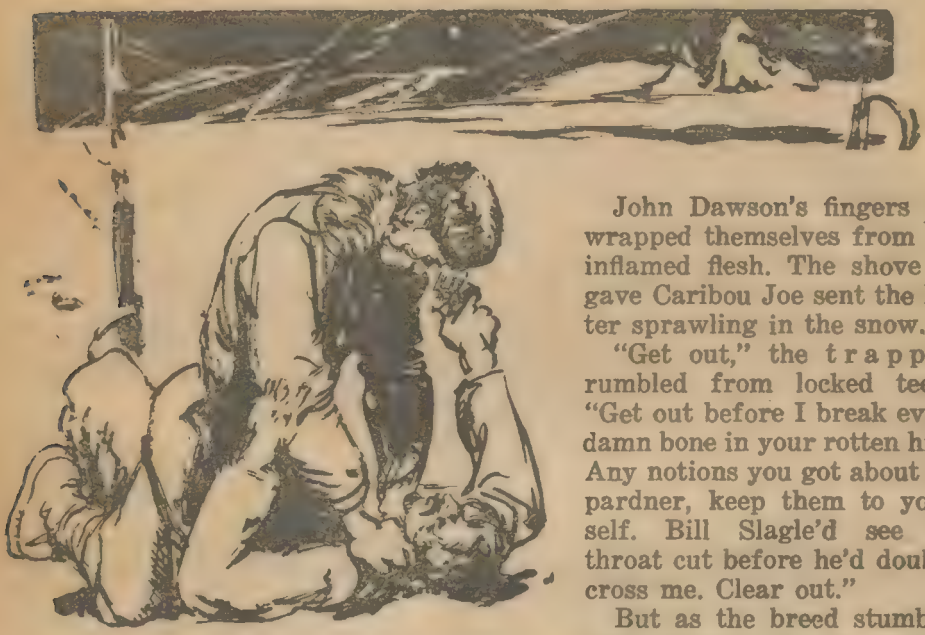
"You ain't losin' — yet!" He chuckled, went on: "You won't be very long in Yuma!"

And he was right. Big Tex and his two remaining friends were pardoned for breaking jail, and simply served out their seven months remaining sentence. Then the gates and the grinning guards at the grim old Territorial prison saw a nice sight. A woman, riding away with her husband, her son, and two laughing men—a happy woman, and Four Horsemen of Happiness.

In a mad race with death, two intrepid trappers learn the harsh, unswerving power of . . .

Cold-Country Justice

By Charles D. Richardson, Jr.



JOHN DAWSON'S grip on the throat of Caribou Joe tightened. Already the giant trapper had the breed raised to his boot tips in the melting snow. Dawson's barrel chest was heaving, his free left fist drawn back in a knotted ball of iron.

"You — skunk!" the big man hoarsed, "that's a damn lie!"

Caribou Joe writhed in the steel grip. His black eyes had begun to bulge alarmingly. "But, m'sieu," he choked. "It is the truth. I—I only tell what I hear. Your pardner, he say he weesh to be free of you. He say maybe he take the furs and clear out sometime. But I think he not mean what he say. The liquor geeve his tongue the twist. Let me go, m'sieu."

John Dawson's fingers unwrapped themselves from the inflamed flesh. The shove he gave Caribou Joe sent the latter sprawling in the snow.

"Get out," the trapper rumbled from locked teeth. "Get out before I break every damn bone in your rotten hide. Any notions you got about my pardner, keep them to yourself. Bill Slagle'd see his throat cut before he'd double-cross me. Clear out."

But as the breed stumbled back through the trees, John Dawson's worried frown deepened. He walked slowly over to a pine stump and sat down, as if suddenly tired from a long portage. He stared out on the Big Bear River, not fifty feet away.

It was spring and the ice sheet cementing the Big Bear's surface was breaking up. Huge cakes of snow-encrusted ice drifted downstream. They groaned and shrieked humanly as they scraped each other. Soon there would be an opening large enough for safe passage to the Post.

John Dawson didn't seem to see the grinding ice. He kept seeing his pardner's face, the clear blue of Bill's eyes and the easy smile on his lips. Bill Slagle wasn't much to look at—he was

short and sort of skinny. But he was the one man John Dawson had picked as pardner for life. Dawson had taken immediately to the clear light in Bill's eyes. He figured that here was a man he could trust.

It was hell to find out he'd been wrong.

That's what made the sinking sun ball, glinting on the shifting ice, seem a cold, grayish thing. A sphere of glass in a sullen sky. One moment Dawson had been looking forward eagerly to the morrow, when he and Bill would paddle their furs down the Big Bear to the Post. Now the trapper wished he'd never seen Bill Slagle.

A curse ripped from Dawson's lips. Much as he disliked the smooth-faced, soft-talking Caribou, he realized that the breed must be right. Liquor did have a way of loosening Bill Slagle's tongue. That was Bill's only weakness —his fondness for drink. He'd slip off nights to Caribou Joe's shack, a mile down river at the bend. Bill knew Caribou always kept a supply of the stuff on hand. John Dawson could tell when Bill had been there, from the thickness of his tongue and the way he'd let go about his past.

Dawson stood up. A man's drinking was his own business, but when it drove him to double-crossing his pardner—

The giant trapper strode to his cabin. Near it, on the thawing beach, lay the cedar canoe they were to use tomorrow. Dawson approached it grimly, drew his knife. What he was about to do burned him like lye, but if Bill was on the level he had nothing to fear. Swiftly, John Dawson cut a hole in the canoe, well up inside the bow where it wouldn't show. If anyone tried to use that canoe before tomorrow, Dawson would know the breed had told the truth.

BILL SLAGLE was sitting by the log fire as Dawson entered the cabin. The little man squinted over his briar pipe. "What's been keepin' you?" he asked in a strained voice.

Dawson studied him keenly. He could see that Bill was acting queerly. As if wary of his pardner. Dawson wondered how Bill would act if he knew about that hole in the canoe.

"Had a little trouble with the traps," the big man said.

They sat in silence for a while, Bill puffing methodically on his pipe. Every now and then, Dawson would catch Bill watching him. And watching the back room where they kept their furs. Bill's blue eyes would then swerve to stare out the window at the moon-silvered ice.

"It'll be swell to get the furs to the Post," he said at length.

John Dawson nodded. He'd caught the brittleness of the other's tone. Yes, it would be swell for Bill Slagle to get the furs to the Post, especially since he would be cashing in on John's share as well. It would be swell for Bill to get all that money, then skip the country. John Dawson muttered an inward curse. He'd been a fool to believe Bill when the latter had said he loved the North as much as John did. Bill loved only money. It wouldn't matter how much he'd hurt his pardner by taking it.

At eight o'clock Bill Slagle got up and stretched. His stubbly chin drooped in a yawn. "Think I'll turn in," he said shortly.

With narrowed eyes, John Dawson watched him peel off his boots and pants, slide between the coarse blankets. Bill never had turned in so early, but Dawson wasn't surprised. Bill would be waiting for his pardner to turn in, so he could grab the furs and skip.

In his own bunk later, with most of his clothes on, John Dawson squirmed in the throes of a nightmare. He saw Bill, his pardner, slinking off in the canoe, saw the boat slowly settling as the icy water spurted from the hole John had cut in the bow. He saw Bill Slagle fighting the crushing ice chunks, heard him scream as the current sucked him under. "John! Help!" The voice died in a throaty gurgle.

Dawson sat up, sweating. Like a spear of lightning it struck him that he couldn't do this thing to Bill Slagle, even though the latter was trying to take the furs. Dawson realized now just how much he cared for Bill Slagle. Bill had guts, double-cross notwithstanding. He'd been the only one John Dawson had ever seen to stand up before a grizzly barehanded, without flinching. He'd fought the bear off with bloody fists, until John himself could retrieve his fallen Winchester.

"Bill," Dawson called in the dark. "Bill!"

No answer. Fear clawing his heart, the trapper jumped from his bed. Slagle's bunk was empty. The furs in the back room were gone, too. Dawson jammed on his boots and stumbled from the cabin.

John Dawson stared at the dwindling canoe out among the ice slabs, then he was running madly along the curved shore for the bend in the Big Bear. That blurred shape paddling in the moonlight would be Bill, and he had the furs with him. Dawson could see them humped above the gunwale.

Already the canoe was sinking. The gunwale cleared the water by a scant inch. Bill had to stop and bail, frantically. Before he could reach either shore, he'd be in that swirling floe, battling for his life.

JOHN DAWSON staggered out on the ice sheet. In his tight, throbbing brain was the mad hope that he could cut across the ice and beat death to the bend. He could cut off almost half a mile that way.

The ice beneath him groaned, swayed sickeningly. The trapper's left foot broke through. He pitched headlong. But he was up in a minute, running, slipping, sliding on the cracking mirror road. Several sections split away, leaving a growling gap. Dawson cleared them, raced on.

Slagle's canoe was full now, the ice cakes crowding. Bill's screams for help drifted back on the frosty air.

"I'm comin', Bill!" Dawson choked, leaping from another swaying cake.

Then he spotted the lean figure on shore, coming out over the ice. John Dawson's heart leaped. Caribou Joe, and racing to help the drowning man! He was much closer to Bill Slagle than Dawson. He might reach him before he went under. Caribou slid on like a deer.

When a few yards from Slagle, the breed froze in his tracks. Dawson gasped. Bill would be lost unless—Then Caribou was leaping forward again, in a desperate attempt to reach Bill Slagle.

At the same moment, a huge mountain of ice moved up and smashed against the cedar canoe. The boat splintered. Dawson got a vision of a bobbing head, a white hand clawing feebly in the air. Canoe, man, and all else were then blotted out by the ice curtain sweeping up. The silence following was freighted with death.

Dawson gave a snarl like a bull grizzly. All his hate, all the seething fire within him, centered on that silent form standing by the frothing water. Caribou Joe had started this. He had poisoned Dawson's mind against Bill Slagle. John didn't give a damn about the furs now. Or that Bill had tried to take them. All that mattered was that Bill, his pardner, was dead—the one man John Dawson thought more of than any other.

"Damn you!" the giant trapper roared, lumbering forward. "If I hadn't listened to you, Bill would be alive now!"

Dawson's eyes were so misted, the dim moonlight so scanty, that he could just about make out Caribou's form before him. Somehow, Caribou Joe looked different, smaller and more lean. But John Dawson's corded fist whistled forward like a flying anvil. It thudded on the side of the other's face.

Had the blow landed direct, it would have smashed the man. As it was, he jackknifed backward like a puppet, striking the ice and sliding fully ten

feet lengthwise. Blood geysered from the fellow's whitened cheek. Dawson jumped him.

But John Dawson's horny fist stayed its downward sweep. For the first time, he got a good look at the other. It wasn't Caribou! It was Bill, Bill Slagle, the man who had died beneath the ice chunks!

"Hell!" said John Dawson, trembling all over.

Bill Slagle opened his eyes. He sat up. "Phew!" he groaned, holding his head. "I sure hope you never get real mad, John, you old fool, have you gone plumb loco?"

Dawson wet his dry lips. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He just couldn't savvy Bill's being alive. "But, dammit, Bill, I saw you drown! I saw you paddlin' off with our furs. Caribou Joe said—"

A cloud seemed to lift from Bill Slagle's white face. He started to grin.

"Caribou, huh? Pardner, I begin to see light. That skunk got us to thinkin' each other crooked. He got me drunk last night, then told me that you were after *my* furs. You know how I believe anything when I'm drunk. And it sticks even after I've sobered. Well, Caribou tricked us both into watchin' each other, while he came in the back window and got the furs.

"I heard the canoe scrape and run out to the bend, figurin' on stoppin' you somehow. Didn't even light up to see if you were still in your bunk. But that leak did the trick. I sure was glad to find it was Caribou sinkin' and not you. To heck with the furs."

John Dawson nodded. "We've been a couple of fools," he agreed. He helped Bill Slagle to his feet. No use telling Bill about that hole in the canoe not being an accident. Caribou Joe's treachery had resulted in his own death trap.

The moon, skidding out from a cloud fluff, was spearing silvery light barbs across the ice as the two men reached their cabin.

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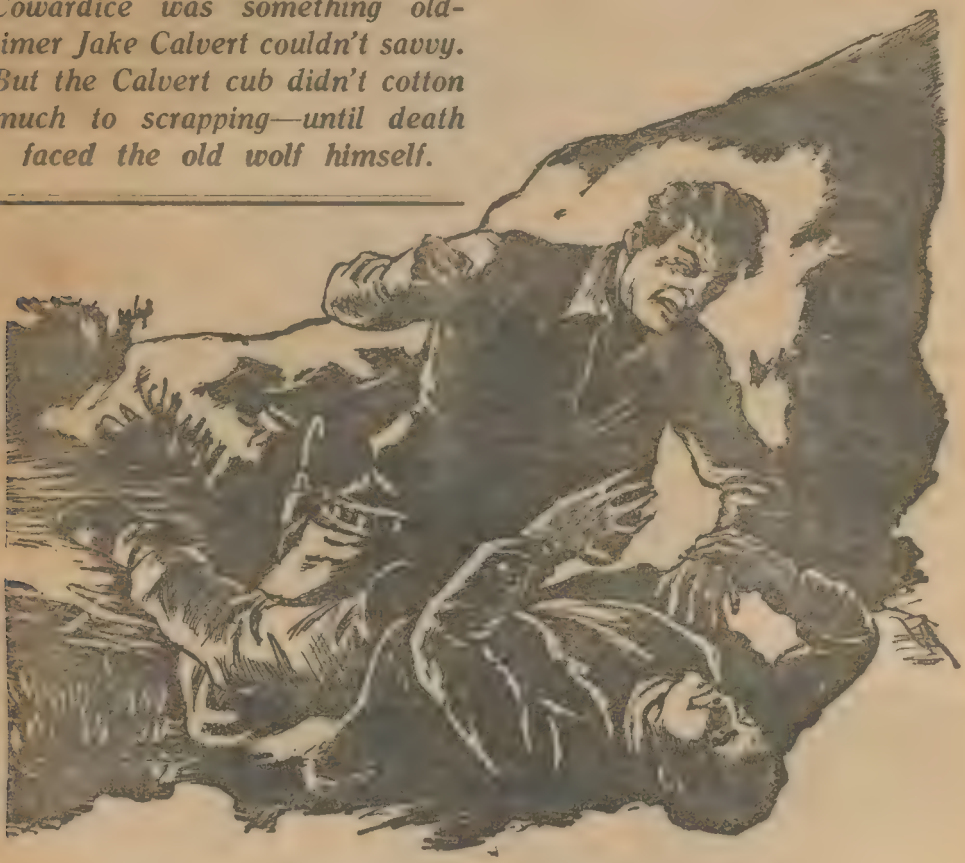
Hoosegow Alibi

Cowardice was something old-timer Jake Calvert couldn't savvy. But the Calvert cub didn't cotton much to scrapping—until death faced the old wolf himself.



By Wilfred McCormick

OLD Jake Calvert loped home from Suerte at sundown with two puffed eyes, a busted nose, and his lips mashed—but a song in his heart. He'd shown them! Rud Hanley might have beaten him half to death, but folks knew Hanley hadn't *whipped* him. There was a difference. The difference between a Calvert, and a quitter!

Bristling like a bantam rooster, in spite of the dozen knock-downs from Hanley's mule-hoof fists, old Jake had still been snarling for more when bystanders stopped the fight. They had lifted him astride his horse, where he'd kinked a trembling finger down at Rud.

"I'll be seein' you again tomorrow! Same place—same time—same reason!"

At this point Breem Taylor, Hanley's bull-shouldered foreman, had slipped the bridle off old Jake's horse. Stepping back, he slapped it across the rump with both reins. The horse

lunged excitedly. Unable to control it, Jake had been whizzed rapidly out of town. By the time he had gone two of the five miles up Suerte Canyon he was cooled off enough to grin. He would even have whistled, if it hadn't been for his cut, swollen lips. Anyhow, he'd shown folks that the Calverts would fight!

Jake put his pony away in the home corral, heaved his saddle atop the fence, and strode stiffly for a small square of light that showed from an east window of his three-room cabin. The old fellow's wiry body, a lean one-sixty of cow country bone and muscle, ached worse than if he'd been dumped from an outlaw bronc. But pride put a spring in his step.

Reaching the house, he gaily shoved open the door. "Supper ready, Johnny?"

Across the room, bent over a skillet of sizzling bacon and eggs, a tall, thin-faced youngster whirled as though he'd been stuck with a spur. Recognizing his father, he started a grin, but the grin suddenly froze on his face.

"What's happened to—"

A deep-throated chuckle from old Jake stopped him. "Nothin' at all! It takes a heap more'n this to stop a Calvert! It don't amount to nothin'!"

"The devil it don't!" A single long stride lifted young Johnny across to his father. He clutched him by both dusty shoulders, his dark eyes boring angrily into the battered face. "Who did it?"

"Rud Hanley. But you ought to see *him!* He's totin' some brands himself that ain't usually found around church! I planted one wallop on his jowl that—"

"What started it?"

Old Jake sobered. The glint went out of his eyes, left them staring dully beyond his son's black-sateened shoulder. "The same old sore," he said sadly. "It's still a-festerin'!"

"You mean—about me?"

"Yeah."

"Folks still claimin' I'm yellow?"

"Yeah. Rud Hanley, this time. But I climbed right into him, son, just like I'd climb a tree!"

The young fellow lowered his hands to his sides. Old Jake noted that they had begun to tremble nervously. He noted, also, that his son no longer looked him in the eye.

"What did Rud say about me?" the boy asked presently.

"That he'd seen Lem Tucker's kid chase you plumb out of town yesterday! But—shucks!" Old Jake laughed, some higher-pitched than usual. "I don't believe it of you, son, of course. That's what I told Rud Hanley. Told him he was a liar! That you was a genuine Calvert, an' the Calverts ain't the runnin' kind! Besides, that Tucker kid ain't more'n fifteen."

"He's big for his age," Johnny surmised gloomily.

"Why—" It was old Jake's turn to grab his son by the shoulders. He shook him as a terrier shakes a gopher. "Do you mean—"

Johnny squirmed loose. He edged slowly away, pausing with his back to the east wall. Old Jake followed him. They were both about the same in height, and build—lean six-footers, without an ounce of fat on their wire-muscled frames. But while old Jake was wearing a faded blue gingham shirt, considerably the worse from his trips into the dirt that afternoon, Johnny's clothes were neat as though he'd just stepped out of a store.

His boots and shirt were a glistening black, while his corduroy pants were a contrasting light tan. He had a fancy silk bandanna around his neck, also of tan, and expensive leather gauntlets laced over both shirt wrists. The two stood eye to eye for a moment, then Jake shoved out a bony paw, caught his eighteen-year-old son by the neck piece.

"Did you run from that spindle-shanked little Tucker kid?"

Johnny dropped his gaze to the floor, making no reply.

"Damn you!" snarled old Jake.

"My own flesh an' blood—" He gulped helplessly, unable to go on.

AGAIN the boy slid from his grasp. He went across the room, dropped onto a stool, face in his hands. Old Jake stared after him dazedly, like a man who had been clubbed over the head. Presently he moved, stiff-legged, to the door. He wobbled outside. In the cool, fresh air, away from the house, he stopped to lean against a creaking windmill tower.

"Then it's—it's true!" he muttered dejectedly. "It's been true all the time! Only—only I was the last blind idiot to catch on! It's awful!"

He could remember, now, a dozen instances in the past that had pointed to his son's cowardice. Always before, he'd groped for a reason—and groped until he found it!

Like the schoolhouse affair. He'd heard it rumored that his son was staying in every recess and noon, and that he always walked home with the teacher. The reason, so rumor had it, was because Breem Taylor's boy was "laying for him." Old Jake had scoffed at the idea. His son merely had a crush on the pretty young teacher. That wasn't uncommon—especially, for a Calvert. He'd been something of a ladies' man himself in his younger days!

Then there was the time Johnny had come home with a bloodied nose. Big "Beef" Thompson had done it, he claimed, and other boys had intervened before he could give Beef the licking he deserved.

A few days later, however, Jake was told that his son hadn't even offered to return the blow. That wasn't hard to understand, either, Jake had reasoned. The kid had merely calculated his chances, seen that the whole gang was ready to jump on him if he threshed Beef Thompson, and used his head! That was an even better combination—brains, as well as nerve. He was proud of the boy!

"It's—it's awful!" old Jake repeated to himself now. "You can learn 'em to ride, an' learn 'em to shoot, an' learn 'em the cow business, but you can't learn 'em guts! What the hell am I gonna do with a Calvert like him, that *ain't* a Calvert?"

Jake's sore mind remembered his own fight of that afternoon. The one he'd promised Suerte for the morrow! What about that? He couldn't go through with it now. Not when Rud Hanley had spoken the truth!

And, still, if he failed to show up at the appointed time, he knew exactly what folks would be saying: "Just like his kid, yeller as a cur dog that's splashed into a paint barrel!" Jake winced at the thought. Maybe he could hunt up Rud that evening? Find him, and apologize? Then if neither one showed up the next day, folks might forget it in time. That would be better, he told himself, than stepping into a fight without his heart in it.

He slipped a hackamore over his pony's head, and again threw on the saddle. Mounting, he started out the gate.

A shadowy figure stepped in front of him. "Ain't you stayin' for supper, Dad?"

Old Jake squeezed the rope reins till tendons stood out in his wrists. "I reckon not," he said icily. "I'm goin' to town an' eat with *men!*" He gigged the pony with his spurs, dashing away from the corrals at a gallop.

HE searched all the restaurants and gambling houses without locating Rud Hanley. Nobody had even seen him. At the Silver Stirrup livery stable, however, he found Breem Taylor. Breem, acting more than a little curious, told him that his employer had left town immediately after the fight. Rud would be back in plenty of time the next day, Breem added, to be on hand for the next battle. So would everybody! Word had scattered to all parts of

town, and folks would be in from the outlying ranches to see it.

Jake, biting his lip in silent helplessness, made no comment. He did not even tell Breem of his plan to apologize to Hanley, that the fight was off. Riding away from the talkative foreman, he turned reluctantly again toward home.

He would see Hanley in the morning. After all, there was still plenty of time. It was only some seven or eight miles over to the Circle Slash outfit. And he and Hanley would have a better chance there to talk things over than with meddlesome bystanders egging them on.

The lights were out when Jake reached home. He noted, also, that Johnny's fancy paint horse was now gone from the corral. He was sure that it had been there with his own, earlier in the evening. Wondering, he put his saddle back on top of the fence, tossed in a block of hay, and went to the house. He struck a match, touched it to the lantern. By its smoky light, he glimpsed a penciled note on the table. He grabbed it curiously.

Dear Dad:

You think I'm yellow because I don't fight every Tom, Dick and Harry that comes along. Well, that just ain't my idea. I've known all the time that I'd scrap if I ever got real mad at somebody. Tonight I am at Rud Hanley. I'm going to make him pay for what he did to you this afternoon. Maybe that will show you!

JOHNNY

Old Jake stood staring at the note for several seconds. His first thought was one of pride—pride in the son who, after all, was a Calvert! Then another thought occurred to him.

"By grabs! That kid ain't no match for a bull like Rud Hanley. Rud will kill him. I've got to stop him before—" Jake crumpled the note in his hand. Whirling, he started for the door. He jerked it open, lunged outside. Halfway to the corrals, however, he stopped.

Would he be making a mistake?

After all, Rud would fight the kid fair. The worst young Johnny could possibly get was a facial working-over like he'd gotten himself. Maybe such a fight was just the thing Johnny needed? Maybe the kid might even win it? But even as the thought came to him, Jake thrust it aside. Not a chance of the kid's licking Rud Hanley. Rud was the strongest, toughest man in the canyon—a match, folks said, for all of hell and half of Texas!

It was a hard decision for a father to make, but old Jake somehow managed to convince himself that it was best not to interfere. He turned back to the house, undressed, and climbed wearily into bed. But in spite of his bruised, aching body, old Jake could not get to sleep. He could hardly close his eyes. The drawn, whitened face of his son haunted him. Maybe, even now, Rud Hanley would be raining vicious blows into that slender face. Jake's muscles grew taut at the possibility. If Rud hurt that boy, he'd —he'd do a-plenty!

From midnight on, he lay tensely listening for the sound of a horse's hoofs that would bring his battered son back to the home roost. Bloody and battered, maybe, but a man! A Calvert! Jake's old heart pounded with new life.

JOHNNY had still not returned at daylight. Growing more uneasy every minute, old Jake cooked a hasty breakfast but did not bother to wash the dishes. Grabbing his floppy-brimmed hat, he bolted through the door. Ten long steps away, he halted. Hoofbeats were clattering from the north side of the house. Old Jake raced around to the front.

Instead of Johnny, however, it was half a dozen men. A huge, big-shouldered fellow with a star on his vest led the way. They rode up to Jake, drew rein in a circle about him. He noted that all were unsmiling, stern as a death-penalty jury.

The sheriff was the first to speak. "Jake Calvert, you're under arrest!"

"Arrest? Me? What for?"

"I reckon you know. But in case you don't—for the murder of Rud Hanley!"

Old Jake's eyes bulged like hen eggs. Jaws sagging, he glanced about the circle of hushed men.

"What've you got against me?"

"Plenty, I reckon. Rud whipped you like a puppy yesterday, an' was fixin' to do it again today. Last night, you hunted him down. We found his body, four hundred an' twenty-three yards west of Rocky Arroyo. Now are you ready to admit it?"

Old Jake, his mind in a dizzy whirl, did not answer. The whole thing seemed strange, unreal. It simply wasn't possible that Johnny could have beaten the powerful Rud Hanley to death! And yet, the sheriff certainly wasn't joking. Old Jake met his gaze again.

"Was Rud's face cut up much?" he inquired.

"Just the scratch you gave him yesterday afternoon."

"Then what killed him?"

The sheriff frowned. "A bullet in the back!" he said grimly.

A bullet in the back! Old Jake's heart sagged clear to his boots. That was awful! For a moment he'd thought the kid had carried out his promise and whipped Rud with his fists, but instead—

"Are you ready to admit it?" the sheriff inquired again.

Jake Calvert raked a palsied hand across his chin. If the kid had killed his man honorably, in a fair fight, he would gladly have taken full blame to shield him. But this shot in the back—this was too much! Why should *he* swing for it, while his cowardly son skipped the country? The best thing was to declare his own innocence and fight them to the limit! Meanwhile, what of the kid? Further investigation might lead them to suspect Johnny. They might hunt him down, and—

Old Jake lifted his eyes. His chin, also, came up a trifle proudly. His gaze met that of the sheriff.

"All right!" he said, his tones crisply clear. "I'll confess it—the whole nasty job!"

The ride to town was made mostly in silence, the sheriff and old Jake leading the solemn procession, the posse trailing in twos behind. As they neared the outskirts of the little canyon city, one of the deputies remarked about the scarcity of people. Not a single person was to be seen on the streets.

Two blocks farther on, rounding a corner that would take them to the jail, they found the answer. A mob, some five hundred strong, had swarmed the courtyard. Breem Taylor stood out in front of the group, a coiled lariat in his hand. For that many people, Jake surmised, they were dangerously quiet. Nearby was a saddled, riderless horse suggestively beneath a cottonwood limb.

The sheriff sensed the situation immediately. So did the posse. They spurred into a solid formation, forcing old Jake into the very middle. The mob pressed toward them, surging with the irresistible impulse of a giant ocean wave.

BREEM TAYLOR, a step in the lead, paused just before the sheriff. His square, bulldog chin was thrust confidently forward, an ugly scowl on his swarthy face. He was a powerfully built man, lacking an inch or so of the six foot mark, but broad and solid as a buffalo. He wore a gray and black plaid shirt, open at his thick, bull neck, and with a flat-topped black Stetson pulled well down over his bushy eyebrows.

He motioned with his rope to the prisoner. "We'll take the job off'n your hands, sheriff."

"No, you won't!"

"Why not? The cur's dead guilty. No use in spendin' five hundred dollars of the county's money to—"

A chorus of agreement interrupted. Shouts of "Hang the murderer!" broke from all parts of the crowd.

The sheriff nodded to his posse,

starting to draw his gun. Before the move was completed, however, Breem Taylor shot his rope snaking forward. It was a perfect throw, settling about the officer's arms and shoulders. He jerked the noose tight, trapping the sheriff.

"We'll handle this ourselves!" he shouted. "If you're idiot enough to try an' protect the cur that dry-gulched poor old Rud, we'll show—"

A sudden wild commotion interrupted. A snorting, plunging paint horse, spurred on by young Johnny Calvert, forced the mob to part. He rode directly up to Breem Taylor.

"Wait! You've got the wrong man!"

"Then who is—"

"Me! I did the killin' myself! Turn Dad loose!"

A seething, tense quiet settled over the mob. Puzzled stares shifted from the flushed youngster to old Jake, then back to the boy again. His chin was tilted high, eyes snapping like coals of fire.

Old Jake Calvert, watching his son open-mouthed, felt warm pride surging through him. Here was a man! A Calvert! Sticking his own neck into certain death, to save another. No matter if he'd done a murder, probably by accident, now he was right. The fine old family blood had leaped into reality. He could die for such a man!

And why not? He was nothing but an old relic himself. Not much longer to go, anyhow. Why not step down and let this new Calvert go on? He could insist that the guilt was his, and—

Old Jake made up his mind on the instant. Bellowing a sudden wild command for silence, he shook his fist at the crowd. They might have listened, had not an unexpected move on the part of the sheriff interrupted. The officer had been frantically working with his bonds, and now he tossed the rope aside. His big six-gun leaped upward. The posse followed his example. Taken off guard, their gaping attention on the two Calverts, the mob now stared up into the menacing muzzles of seven lowered revolvers.

"The first man to move," the sheriff snarled tensely, "gets a bellyful of lead. Now, stand back! I'm takin' old Jake inside."

"But the kid's just confessed it!" howled Breem Taylor.

"Johnny's confession ain't worth a snowball in Hades!" the sheriff said loudly.

"Why ain't it?"

"Because Johnny was locked up all night! It seems that he'd happened across Lem Tucker's boy an' pounded the face off'n him. Then Lem himself took a hand. Johnny would have whipped him, too, if I hadn't pulled him off an' throwed him in jail to cool down. Now, stand aside, folks! We're takin'—"

A shrill, triumphant yell from old Jake Calvert interrupted. Jake had tossed his hat high in the air, was standing forward in his stirrups.

"Then I ain't guilty, neither!" he shouted. "I just told you I was, to protect the boy!"

"We've got plenty of evidence that—"

"Nothin' but guesswork!" old Jake cut in hastily.

"Is that so?" sneered the sheriff. "Well, besides plenty of circumstantial evidence, I'll ask you to have a look at this!" He reached inside his saddle bag, drawing out a section of multicolored horsehair strap. "We found this beside the body," he went on. "When you tried to get away, your bridle rein must have caught on a limb. Do you deny that it's yours?"

OLD JAKE didn't need a closer look. He had recognized the rein instantly, the only one of its kind in the region. Johnny had made it for him, a year ago—made it with his own hands. The sight of it, now, stunned him like a blow in the face. He groped for words, found none.

"Do you deny that it's yours?" the sheriff repeated triumphantly.

Old Jake gulped. Then a sudden thought flashed through him. Once more he rose in his stirrups, letting out a wild cowboy whoop. He pointed a finger at Breem Taylor.

"There's the real killer, folks! Just ask him where he spent the night!"

Breem laughed coarsely, but confidently. "I reckon that won't be hard to explain," he said. "But, even so, there ain't a man alive that can claim I'd raise my hand against poor old Rud! Him an' me was the same as brothers since—"

"Since the night," interrupted Johnny, "that I overheard him accuse you of selling Circle Slash beef on the sly to Bronc Lawing?" The youngster turned eagerly to the sheriff. "If you'll put Bronc on the coals, an' make 'em plenty hot," he suggested, "I'll bet he'll admit things to prove Breem— Wait! Stop him, somebody!"

Breem Taylor had spun around. He was elbowing his way through the crowd, had almost reached the edge. Johnny Calvert shot sudden hooks to his horse. The paint lunged forward. Just as Breem freed himself from the crowd, darting for the nearest building, Johnny spurred close at his heels. Breem whirled, throwing up his gun.

A shot roared. The stunned crowd saw Johnny fall from the saddle. He was up in an instant, though. Clutching a bloody shoulder, he staggered around the building where Breem had disappeared. Another shot crashed above the confusion. Then a man's hoarse bellow—the cry of a desperate, cornered human!

Jake and the sheriff's group rushed to the spot. They saw that Johnny had tripped his man to the ground. He was clutching frantically at a pants leg, holding on with every ounce of strength remaining in his bullet-racked body. Blood streamed from the wound in his shoulder, and from another in his neck. Breem was struggling to recover his pistol, which in falling he had dropped.

"Stay with him, son!" screamed old Jake.

The sheriff leaped down. A dozen other strong hands laid hold of Breem Taylor, forced him back against the building. Within thirty seconds a deputy had clicked handcuffs about his wrists.

The sheriff turned to Jake Calvert. "Your own skirts still ain't clean," he said grimly. "But at least we've got evidence enough to call for a trial."

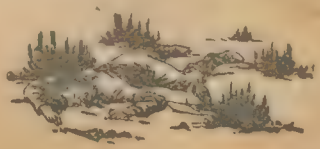
Old Jake winked one eye, still puffed from his battle on the evening before. "Your evidence against me," he opined, "ain't worth a sheepherder's chance at becomin' an angel!"

"But that bridle rein—"

"That was what tipped me off to Breem in the first place," Jake went on to explain. "A hundred witnesses will swear, come to think of it, that Breem himself took the bridle off of my horse yesterday afternoon. He used it to stampede me out of town! That's just like Breem—thick-skulled, an' dumb, an'—But never mind! I'll tell you some more, when I get through shakin' hands with a man!"

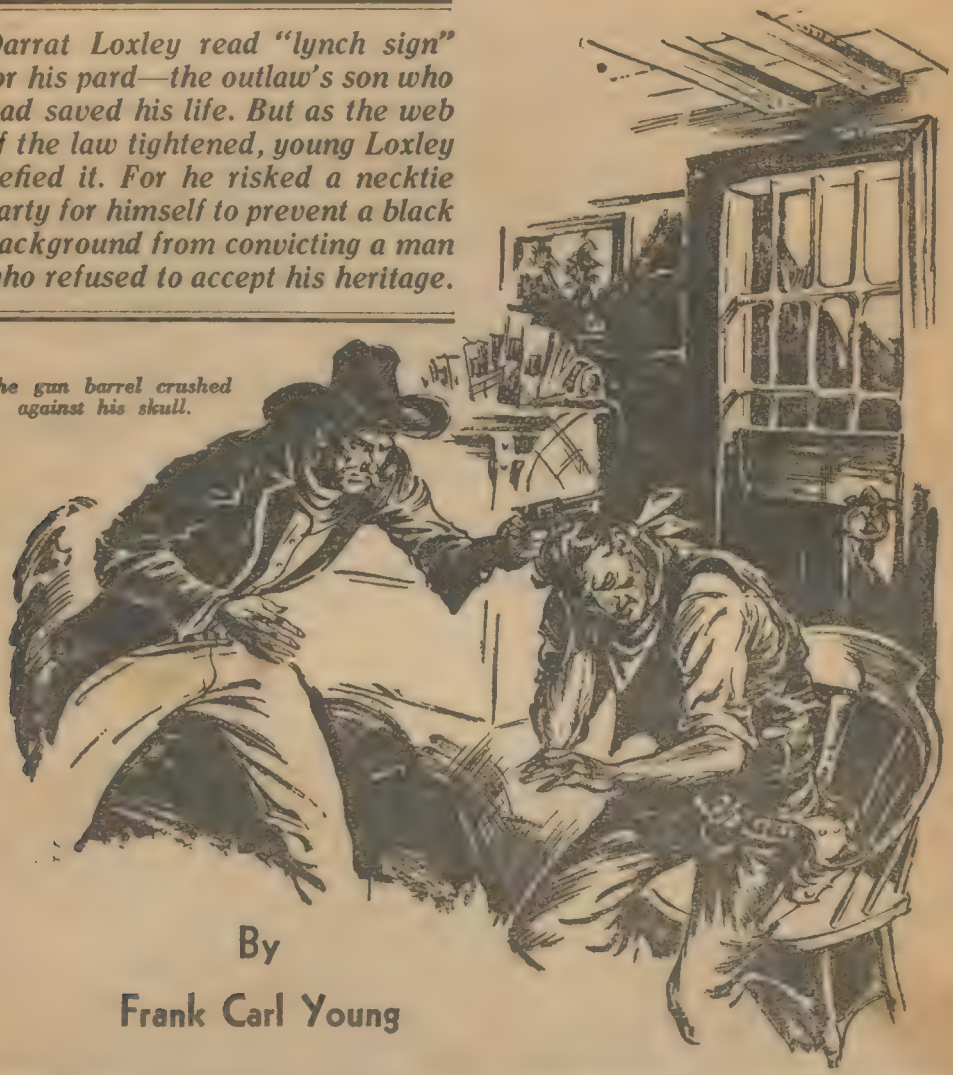
"A man?" the sheriff asked wonderingly.

"Sure!" Old Jake grinned proudly. "My boy! The youngest, but gamest, Calvert of us all!"



Outcast's Back-Trail

Darrat Loxley read "lynch sign" for his pard—the outlaw's son who had saved his life. But as the web of the law tightened, young Loxley defied it. For he risked a necktie party for himself to prevent a black background from convicting a man who refused to accept his heritage.



The gun barrel crushed against his skull.

By

Frank Carl Young

DARRAT LOXLEY, young, lean-jawed owner of the Box L, had just finished replacing a broken bar in the corral fence. He looked up when Pinky Smith, one of the hands he had sent into Sage Springs for supplies, clattered into the dooryard and hauled the creaking buckboard to a dusty halt.

Darrat squinted his smoky gray eyes against the glare of the setting sun. He noticed that Pinky was unusually excited as he climbed from the seat and swiped the grit from his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Knew it would happen some day, boss," said Pinky cockily, obviously proud of his insight on something. "Polk Bankard robbed the mornin' stage an' killed Jeb Olley, the shotgun messenger."

"What!" said Darrat unbelievingly.

Polk Bankard was a young rancher like himself, and one to whom Darrat

would be indebted for the rest of his life. The very life Polk had saved that day a year ago when Darrat's mount stumbled in front of a roundup stampede.

"Yep, that's right," went on Pinky. "Polk stole the thirty thousand Horg Farner was gittin' from Elverson City to cover the payrolls tomorrow at his bank. Your pop got Polk, all right, but Polk ain't tellin' what he did with the money. Yep, jes' like I often said, some day Polk Bankard's thievin' blood will break loose an' he'll take the same trail now rid by his outlawin' ol' man."

Darrat's sinewy fists knotted into white-knuckled, bulging-veined lumps of suppression. His narrowed eyes swept across the sage-blued range toward the shadowed slopes of the Capitan Ridge where Polk Blankard's little cow outfit nestled among cottonwood and black oak.

"Who says Polk done all this?" he asked grimly, without looking at Pinky.

"All the passengers claim they heard him say, 'This is the way my father would do it.' An' jumpin' coyotes, boss, it's plain well known that Polk needs money bad to run that spread an' square Horg Farner's note. An' then there's his father, Hachita Bankard, the Rio Raider, an'—"

"Shut up!" blared Darrat suddenly.

With sullen grimness, Darrat threw his rig on his steel-dust grulla. The setting sun glinted on the single belt of cartridge cases looped around his waspish waist, on the silver-riveted holster draped low on his cholla-raked chaps. Vaulting into the hull, he spur-curried past the astonished Pinky, chopped through the dust of his ranchyard toward the cattle town of Sage Springs—and Polk Bankard.

"Polk didn't do it!" his rampant thoughts kept repeating, as he swept through the grama grass and mesquite.

Darrat knew more about Polk Bankard than anyone on Sage Springs range. Polk had come north to try ranching two years ago. Folks immediately shunned him when they learned that he was the son of Hachita Bankard, the Rio Raider, the outlaw no lawman had ever tagged or photographed for reward posters.

What folks didn't know about Polk was the fight Polk was putting up in order to wean himself away from the earlier influence of his outlaw father. Polk wanted to go straight, to ranch, to win the respect and admiration of honest folks.

After having saved his life, Darrat's indebtedness to Polk drew him closer. Now he understood the outlaw's son so completely, knew his tremendous yearning to do the right thing, that the narrow-minded, prejudiced, open resentment of Sage Springs range galled and angered him. It appeared as if folks hungered to see Polk make a mistake, to expose his outlaw heritage just so they might yell: "I told you so!"

"He hasn't got a chance, whether he did it or not!" Darrat's thoughts lashed him, as the wind cut his coffee-brown cheeks, flattened the brim of his gray Stetson. "If Pop's got him in jail, they'll tear him out an' string him up!"

More than once Darrat had felt the sting of their scorn for his loyalty to Polk. Even though his father, Sheriff Lane Loxley, law-patrolled Sage Springs and was the most respected man in the country, they couldn't help letting him see they held in contempt anyone who championed the son of a much wanted outlaw like the Rio Raider. It was even causing a slight breech between him and his father. His defense of Polk Bankard was beginning to cost a large price.

If only it had been some one else who scooped him out of the path of those stampeding hoofs a year and a half ago!

"I can't let him down no matter what they think!" Darrat commanded himself aloud. He topped the rise above the little cattle town sprawled in the softening dusk of eventide.

Lighted windows winked at him, beckoning him on. "But if Polk didn't rob the stage an' kill Jeb, who did?"

DARRAT read "lynch sign" as soon as the grulla chopped a dozen yards down the main street of Sage Springs. On nearly every corner he saw groups of men talking and gesticulating toward the jail office in the center of town. Some voices rose louder than others, and Polk's name and "lynch" were the words he heard most often.

While the outskirts had been comparatively quiet, the closer he drew to the center of town and the law office of his father, the thicker became the groups. The voices were louder and angrier. And it was difficult to weave his mount down the crowded, wagon-rutted street.

Polk Bankhard was headed for hemp and a limb, unless—

Darrat raked the grulla anew, spurted down the last block. He didn't know just what he could or would do. He only knew that he must first see Polk, talk to him, hear his answers. Then he would be sure.

"There goes Sheriff Loxley's kid. Figured he'd come prancin' in soon's he heard that Polk rat was cornered."

Darrat had just passed the Crossed Colts Saloon. On the shadowed veranda leaning lazily against the scarred, unpainted columns were Pud Draves and Tate Giles, two of Horg Farner's low-holstered punchers.

Darrat gave the two a quick, damning glance. Pud was short and heavy, with pouchy jowls and ratlike eyes sunk deeply below crooked, black brows. Tate Giles was slatlike, hollow-cheeked. He had a broken, hooked nose and thin, sneering mouth that always seemed to be spilling a soundless curse.

Darrat held little love for the pair, or for Horg Farner, their boss. Horg owned the big Triple F brand, besides presiding over the local bank and all political appointments. His influence was tremendous, and as Darrat always felt, mainly due to the gun-breed with which he payrolled his outfit. Horg was respected — because he was feared.

"Any objections?" Darrat called to the calloused pair as he passed, angled across the street toward his father's office.

Tate Giles thoughtfully rubbed the side of his unshaven jaw, bulged the opposite cheek with his tongue.

"Yeh, kinda, Darrat," he purred grimly. "We ain't jes' gonna like it a heap if yuh try an' use your influence with your ol' man to git the killin' skunk Polk off. Ain't gonna like it one bit."

Pud shoved away from the column, straightened, eyed Darrat coolly.

"We know you're thick as grease with Polk. Don't git foolish, Darrat."

Darrat toed out of his stirrup. He hitched up his shell belt and called over his shoulder as he ducked under the hitchrack:

"It's good to see you boys so interested in the welfare of this town—all of a sudden! I'll be right careful to be good."

His biting sarcasm was not lost on Horg Farner's punchers. Pud shot Tate a quick, speculative glance, then frowned. Tate's deep-set eyes glinted, then glittered, and his thin fingers began to drum on the smooth butt of his gun.

"Looks like work ahead, Pud," he whispered grimly.

DARRAT shouldered through the crowd, knocked on the locked office door and was admitted by his father. Sheriff Lane Loxley was a tall, thick-shouldered man with silvering hair and penetrating gray eyes that now glinted like gems in the light from the kerosene lamp on the desk.

The lawman was hard-grained and stern, as square as a cube of granite and as firmly set. He lived with Darrat at his ranch and expected to retire there in later years. Between the two existed a bond of father and son love stronger than the ordinary.

"What do you want, son?" asked the sheriff of Sage Springs.

Darrat looked squarely at his father. "I want to see if I can give a gent a square chance in this narrow-minded town," he replied heatedly. "From what I've seen outside, he ain't due to get it!"

Darrat's father crimsoned, then controlled himself. "I've lawed this town fer nigh twenty years, boy, an' no man I've handled was treated unfair."

"No man you ever treated was the son of Hachita Bankard, either," replied Darrat, wishing that he didn't have to come to odds with his father over this. "Ain't sayin' you'd deliberately do the wrong thing, Pop, but it jes' looks like you mightn't be able to help yourself from doin' it. You don't know Polk like I do. Nobody does. He ain't the kind that'd kill a man fer thirty thousand dollars, or a million, either. Where is he?"

Darrat's father led him to the cell block beyond the office. Horg Farner, banker-rancher, was there. His big, thick-wristed fists were hooked apelike around the bars of Polk's cell.

Horg was a giant, his massive shoulders straining the silk of his shirt, his bullet-shaped head seemingly neckless. His black, satin-lined Stetson was thumbed back over rusty-colored hair, his close-set eyes of the same color more fiery than usual.

Horg was bellowing at Polk, demanding to know where he had hidden the money, threatening him. When he saw Darrat, the corner of his thick-lipped mouth quivered in a repressed sneer.

Darrat disregarded him, glanced at Polk who sat hunched on the hard bunk, his straw-haired head buried in his brown-backed hands. He was tall and lean like Darrat, lacking only Darrat's broadness of shoulder to have an identical build.

"Come here a minute, will yuh, Polk?"

At the sound of Darrat's voice, the young rancher looked up. Worry-pinched eyes smoothed, brightened with renewed spirit. Grimly set lips parted, and he sprang to his feet, rushed to the bars.

"I'm glad yuh come, Darrat! You ain't figurin' I did it, are yuh?"

It was enough for Darrat. He *knew* Polk. Knew that before him stood the son of an outlaw. A man with a heritage he had refused to accept, a man desperately fighting for decency, the respect and admiration of those around him. A man whose black background was blotting out the brightness of his future.

"No, Polk, *I know* yuh didn't do it."

DARRAT could find no way to convince either his father or Horg that Polk was innocent. For more than an hour he used all the arguments he could think of. But he had no proof of his convictions.

Horg's main interest was obtaining justice, getting back the thirty thousand his bank was due to lose. The banker-rancher continuously pointed out Polk's past life with his father. He repeated words of the passengers who witnessed the robbery, explained that Polk owed him three thousand to clear his note.

Darrat's lawman father saw it the same way that Horg did. "Son, you've misplaced your trust. Don't be a fool any longer. Polk Bankard is the son of Hachita, an' blood always leaks out in time. You've been misled plenty, boy. Polk's headed for a long sentence down in Yuma—if the crowd outside don't git him first."

That was the thing that bothered Darrat most. The crowd outside. The blind, unreasonable mob that would, when its frenzy was properly pitched, disregard everything in its lust to swing Polk Bankard.

"I'm gonna git a drink, Loxley," said Horg, rising and heading for the door. "I'll be back again. Between us maybe we can force a way to make Polk reveal where he put that money."

Sheriff Lane Loxley grabbed his hat, joined Horg. "I'll go with you. I've got to get some supper fer Polk

an' m'self." He turned to Darrat. "You better stay here until I get back, Darrat. This crowd is gettin' kinda ornery an' I ain't itchin' fer Polk to stretch hemp—their way. Here's the keys. Lock the door after us."

The temptation was terrific for Darrat after his father and Horg had left. Darrat stared down at the keys. He hadn't yet locked the door. Among the jangling group was the one that would open Polk's cell. It would also shut him off from his father forever.

He talked to Polk for ten minutes. Polk had no alibi. He could only explain that he did not even see the stage that day.

"Where were you at the time of the holdup, then?" asked Darrat in desperation. He was trying to get hold of at least one little clue, one tangible fact that might act as a lever to unearth more revealing ones.

Polk shook his head. "That's somethin' I can't tell even you, Darrat. But I wasn't on the stage road with a gun in my hand or a mask on my face. You believe that, don't you?"

Darrat took one more look into that desperate, pleading face, those wide, almost screaming eyes. Once again he heard the thundering roar of hundreds of hoofs, felt the trembling earth under his sprawled body. He was conscious of the strong yank of Polk's fingers hooking into his belt, yanking him to safety just in time as he swept by on his horse.

"Yuh believe me, don't yuh, Darrat?" repeated Polk.

Darrat said nothing. Instead, he returned to the outer office, went to the side door that opened out into a narrow alley running at right angles to the street. Using a key, he unlocked it.

He knew fully what this was going to cost him—his father's damnation, the scorn and contempt of the whole range, perhaps even the noose they were preparing for Polk. But when a man deliberately risks his own life to save yours, you can't hesitate when your opportunity comes to repay him.

Besides, Darrat had an idea. If Polk had been framed, then the one who engineered it would be mighty upset should he escape. Darrat decided to see who would be the most upset individual on Sage Springs range.

"It's Polk's only chance," his thoughts insisted.

He was sorting out the key on the way to Polk's cell when there came the sound of a tinkling spur behind him. Whirling, he found himself facing a man who had just stepped inside the front door.

The man was twice his age and garbed in dark shirt, pants and vest. A black flop-brimmed hat was pulled low over his eyes, leaving only a square-jutting chin and firm, straight nose exposed. About the lean hips were crisscrossed shell belts, angling low on either thigh and supporting hand-tooled holsters and an ebony-butted Colt—the other being in the stranger's fist.

"I don't want any talk or foolishness," came a purring chilling voice. "Toss them keys on the floor an' sit down in that chair."

Darrat made no move to obey. Although he couldn't recognize the stranger, he was confident that he must be one of the lynch mob gathering on the corners of Sage Springs.

"How did yuh git in here?" he asked. Then he quickly remembered that he hadn't locked the front door, having forgotten about it while mulling over what to do about Polk.

"I warned yuh about talkin'—"

Before Darrat could duck or leap aside, the dark-garbed stranger sprang toward him. He saw the gun barrel swing high, slash down, glinting like a steel blade in the lamplight.

As it crushed down his hat and against his skull, he heard the mysterious stranger growl:

"Yuh fool! Didn't want to do this!"

The room then vanished from Darrat's vision, swallowed up by a million blazing lights. His legs seemed to jell and he knew he was falling. As he thudded against the floor, painless oblivion engulfed him.

TO Darrett it seemed but an instant later that he again could see the objects of his father's office, hear the sounds of the jabbering groups on the corners, the slapping of moths against the desk lamp.

But he knew it was longer than that the moment he got to his feet and wobbled to the cell block. Polk was gone —and so was the mysterious stranger. On the desk he found the keys. And the drawer that held Polk's belt and gun was open—and empty.

"Who could it have been? I wonder if he really was one of the lynch mob, or—"

His thoughts were guillotined by the clump of boot heels and the appearance of his father and Horg Farner in the doorway.

"I thought I told yuh to lock this door, Darrat!" said Sheriff Loxley angrily, supporting a tray of grub with one fist. "That was a pretty bad risk you—"

The lawman's eyes stabbed past Darrat to the wide open cell door. He paled, then flushed a vivid red. From his fingers the tray tilted, crashed to the floor.

"Darrat, I never thought you'd do that on your own father!"

Darrat saw Horg's massive chest heave, strain against his silk shirt. The rancher-banker's eyes narrowed, then flamed with rage. Springing across the room, he caught Darrat by the shoulders, shouted in his face:

"You double-crossin' coyote, you oughta swing fer this! I knew we couldn't trust you. You liked Polk's breed too much fer me. We'd have forced the whereabouts of that money out of Polk in time. Now he's gone! My bank an' every rancher in this valley stands to lose plenty because of you." He whirled on Darrat's father. "Sheriff, I'm expectin' you to do somethin' about this!"

Darrat knew what Horg meant; knew, too, that his father would remember his continuous defense of Polk. Sheriff Lane Loxley didn't have to be told his duty. He'd been performing it for twenty years. Full of shame, he turned grimly toward Darrat, held out his hand, palm up.

"You're my son, Darrat, but the law makes no exceptions. You've aided a criminal to escape an' you've got to pay the same as anyone else. Until we capture Polk, you're settin' in his cell an' takin' his punishment. Darrat, I want your gun."

Darrat knew what this was costing his proud father. A record of unstained honesty and square-dealing had been marred by his own son. It was cutting deeply into the old lawman—and twice as deeply into Darrat.

He would have done almost anything rather than shame his father.

Darrat calmly pulled his gun, handed it butt first to his father. But every muscle in his lean frame ached to hurl himself at Horg, smash bony knuckles into the rancher's fierce, livid features. For Darrat had never before permitted any man to address him as Horg just had.

"Here's my gun, Pop," he replied, his eyes holding fast to those of his father. "But I didn't free Polk. Yes, I was goin' to, I'll admit. But I didn't get around to it. A funeral-garbed hombre beat me to the play."

Horg snorted his derision. "Jes' a lie!" he brayed, stomping up and down the office. "You can't worm out of it that way, Darrat! Nobody helped you—"

At this moment the door swung open and old Jeff Wetherill, owner of the livery, stepped inside. Old Jeff had traveled plenty in his time, seen much. His sun-leathered face was twitching with excitement, his eyes lighted strangely.

"Sheriff, I've seen him!" he said excitedly. "He's here in Sage Springs, or was! Saw him once down along the border five year ago an' never forgot him. He pulled in at my livery half an hour or so ago an' at first he jes' seemed like some one I used to know. I jes' remembered a few minutes ago! Yep, it was him, all right."

"Who was who?" demanded Sheriff Loxley impatiently as he took Darrat's extended gun.

Old Wetherill gulped, seemed exasperated that they didn't already know.

"Why Hachita Bankard, yuh dang fool!" he bellowed. "I've been tellin' yuh right along. Dressed in black with his hat yanked down an' all. Bet he's here fer plenty no good, I'll bet!" Suddenly the old man scratched his white-thatched head, his eyes bulging with a new discovery. "By jinks, he's Polk Bankard's pop, ain't he? Say, I'll bet—"

Every man in that tiny office seemed to think of the same thing. Their glances locked speculatively, their lips twitching. Darrat now knew why Polk had refused to disclose his whereabouts at the time of the holdup. He had been with his father, must have been. For just a moment Darrat's faith in Polk wavered. Then he thrust the disloyal thought from his mind.

"They were in on it together," Darrat heard his father say. "Horg, Hachita got his kid to pull that robbery an' after we caught him, he come to git Polk out of jail. Hachita's got the money!"

Horg seemed puzzled and worried. Darrat took instant note of it. The rancher-banker seemed a little surprised, too, at this sudden disclosure. Suddenly he pointed an accusing finger at Darrat.

"Wal, if it hadn't been fer him, Hachita would never have got his kid out of here, would he? Sheriff, I hate to say this, but since we all know how Darrat feels toward Polk, it shore enough looks like he's in cahoots with the Bankards. He left the door open, didn't he?"

Sheriff Loxley uttered a curse, and nodded.

FROM the barred cell window Darrat could see and hear the gathering of the big posse his father had ordered. Horg and his two gun-quick punchers were among them. Sharp voices, jingling bridle chains and chopping, nervous hoofs sent grim music through the town. After the large posse was divided into three parties, they thundered into the night.

A strange, throbbing silence abruptly gripped Sage Springs. The corners and crowded street were empty. Nearly all had joined the hunt for the notorious Hachita and his son, Polk.

For two hours Darrat's thoughts pounded loudly in his aching brain. He couldn't blame his father for putting him in jail. Sheriff Loxley was law in Sage Springs. And he, his son, had disobeyed that law, had made possible the escape of a prisoner. The penalty was to remain in Polk's cell until Polk—and now Hachita, his father—were brought in. Horg Farner had insisted on that.

Darrat gave Horg a lot of thought. Horg wasn't his usual becalmed self. He was taking an unusual amount of interest in this affair. And something had bothered him considerably when he learned that Polk's father was on Sage Springs range. He had almost seemed frightened.

Darrat's smoky gray eyes suddenly narrowed with suspicion and conjecture. Five minutes later, after carefully thinking it all out, he was pounding the edge of his bunk with his fist, his teeth clamped tight, his eyes fiery with desperation. Then he sprang to the cell door, shook it violently.

"I've got to get out of here!" he muttered fiercely. "Polk's been framed as sure as I've got lungs. If those posses git him, the nearest tree will end him. An' if they don't git him, he'll go back with his outlaw father fer havin' saved him." Darrat didn't know which was the worse fate for young Polk Bankard.

But escape from the jail-house of Sage Springs was not an easy matter. It was concrete, with steel floor and ceiling, and a door that defied picking or hinge-smashing. Without a key it was impossible to escape.

He knew there was another set in his father's desk drawer. But that

was in the office, out of reach. And there was no one who would—

As Darrat turned disconsolately back to his cell bunk, he heard the street door creak open. Pressing his face against the bars of his cell door, he strained to pierce the gloom of the office, his father having put out the lamp when he and Horg departed.

But all Darrat could make out was a shadowy figure against the lighter background of the street as the door opened. The figure leaped stealthily inside, softly closed the door. Impenetrable gloom again swallowed the outer office.

The short hairs on Darrat's neck bristled as he heard the drawer of his father's desk open. There came the sound of something like a sack being dumped into it. The drawer was then carefully slid shut.

At this moment Darrat's belt buckle scraped loudly against the steel bar of his cell door. There was the jangle of spurs as the intruder spun around, a soft curse.

"Who's that?" came a voice Darrat remembered having heard only a few hours ago.

It was Hachita Bankard, the Rio Raider—Polk's outlaw father!

IN that split, tense moment, Darrat leaped to half a dozen conclusions, wondered which five if not all six were wrong. What could be bringing Polk's father back to Sage Springs? Was the man a fool?

"This is Darrat Loxley, the gent yuh conked on the skull a few hours ago," replied Darrat. "I'm sorta takin' the place o' Polk on account of you, Hachita!"

There was the gritty scrape of boot soles on the office floor. A moment later the faint light striping through Darrat's cell window splashed weakly on the grim, rigid features of the Rio Raider as the outlaw pressed close to the cell door.

"Polk told me about you, Darrat," came the outlaw's icy, purring voice. "Sorry I had to bust yore skull like that, but I had to git my kid out of here. He's comin' back with me to trail the border."

That stung Darrat. Polk didn't belong to that kind of life, father or no father. Unless influenced, Polk would make as fine and decent a cattleman as anybody. He must prevent Polk from going back.

"Then what are you doin' here? An' where's Polk now? If one of them posses combin' the hills tag him they'll string him before he c'n go any place!"

Darrat's concern over Polk seemed to affect the outlaw. When he spoke again, some of the grimness had left his voice.

"Polk's waitin' fer me at Butte Forks," replied Hachita. "I'm back here 'cause Polk sent me back—with the money. Said he wouldn't go along with me unless I returned it."

"Yuh—yuh mean it was you who pulled that robbery an' killed Jeb Olley!" exclaimed Darrat with amazement, for he had doped it entirely different. "Yuh mean yuh did that an' pinned it on your own kid so's yuh could save him an' make him figure it was best to go back to the old life? Hachita, you're a contemptible—"

The outlaw's fists shot through the bars, caught Darrat's shirt front, yanked him close.

"Listen to me, Darrat!" growled the Rio Raider fiercely. "I'm not much, I know, but I don't pull snake tricks like that—on anybody! I came up here to see if my kid would go back with me. I'm not young any more, an' the dim trails are gittin' plumb lonely.

"Polk refused me, see, an' I was all set to pull out when I heard of that stage bein' loaded down with plenty of payroll stuff I usually take. I figured it would be worth my time fer comin' up here an' laid fer it. But another masked hombre beat my time an' I got there jes' as he was finishin' up. I trailed him, rammed a gun in his ribs an' took the payroll sacks an' left him cussin' plenty.

"I don't know who the gent was, but late this afternoon when I heard

Polk was bein' held fer it, I rode back an' yuh know the rest. Now git the idea out of your skull I tried to git my own kid into trouble, jes' so I could get him out of it, an' make him think me pretty fine an' go with me again. If I could jes' know who that gent was who did tag it on him, I'd spraddle him out with—"

Darrat's fists clamped on Hachita's wrists. "Wal, I know now who it was. An' if yuh'll jes' git me out of here we'll straighten out a dirty mess!"

There came the immediate scrape of steel on holster leather. "I'll blow the lock!"

"An' have the rest of the town pilin' in here, eh?" snapped Darrat warningly. "In the second drawer of that desk yuh'll find another set of keys. Use them!"

IN the blackness of the office, Darrat couldn't see Hachita, but he sensed the outlaw's nervous eagerness. Taking his gun and belt from the drawer where his father had put it, Darrat strapped it on. With his finger tips, he accounted for every chamber. They were all filled.

A glance through the front window indicated that the street was empty except for several hip-shop cayuses at the gnawed saloon rack opposite. Darrat aimed to borrow two of those mounts.

"C'mon, Hachita!"

With the stealth of catamounts, they slipped outside. It was dark and shadowy in front of the sheriff's office, but stripes of light lancing through the windows of the saloon opposite brightened the dusty, rutted street.

They crossed the plank sidewalk, ducked under the hitchrack, and were just toeing into dusty street when drumming hoofs shattered the silence. A moment later one of the posses, headed by his father and Horg Farner, thundered around the L at the end of the block and chopped toward the jail office.

And in the center of the grim cavalcade, wrists and ankles thonged to horn and stirrup, was Polk Bankard!

Darrat knew that he and Hachita could not escape notice. They were caught directly in the path of the oncoming horsemen as they stood in the light spraying from the saloon windows.

"They got my kid again!"

Darrat shot a quick glance at Hachita. The outlaw was in a desperate spot. They would smoke him down the moment they recognized him. But Hachita, the Rio Raider, made no attempt to run.

In the swift, tense moment before his father and the posse chopped to a halt before them, Darrat sensed why the outlaw was standing it out. The son he had rescued once, was again caught in the web of the law—the law Hachita Bankard hated. He was now ready to go down trying to save Polk again!

Darrat's admiration for Hachita was brief. Horg Farner had spotted them. The banker-rancher yanked his big sorrel to a cavorting halt, stabbed an accusing finger at them and yelled:

"There's Darrat—an'—an' Hachita! Loxley, I told yuh that double-crossin' kid o' yours was in with the thievin' Bankards. Hachita must have found out yuh locked Darrat up an' come to git him out."

The impact of that accusation left Darrat cold with fury. The posse yanked guns, quickly maneuvered around them. He spotted Pud Draves and Tate Giles dismounting and flanking Horg as the latter slipped from leather.

Other hands pulled Polk from his rig. Polk seemed semiconscious, a thin trickle of blood coursing down his cheek from his head. He hadn't given up easily.

"I can't believe it, Darrat," came the shaking, choking voice of Sheriff Loxley, as he shamefully quit his horse. "An' yet, with that killin' outlaw standin' beside yuh out here in the street after I locked yuh—"

"He had nothin' to do with it," came Polk's weak, protesting voice, as they hustled him toward the jail office. "An' neither did I. I've told yuh a dozen times my father gun-ribbed the skunk who pulled the job—whoever he was!"

Darrat knew he had waited long enough. With every muscle tense, his gun-arm quivering with restraint, he riveted his narrowed eyes on Horg Farner.

"Gents, the skunk yuh want is right here with us," he purred icily, conscious that Hachita was but a pace from him, rigid as rock but breathing with deep, panting gasps. "I've suspected it from the first, but wasn't sure until Hachita here told me the gent he jumped wore—"

A sibilant oath came from the lips of Horg Farner. His big hulk leaped into convulsive action. At the same instant his two gun-swift punchers, Pud and Tate, sprang sidewise from him, their gun-arms hovering tensely above smooth butts.

"That's a lie! You can't pin it on me that way, Darrat!" denied Horg. His bloated features twisted with rage the moment he heard the posse behind him gasp with incredulity.

DARRAT saw his father whirl on the banker-rancher. And in that moment Darrat knew his little play has worked. Hachita had never told him exactly what the thief had worn.

"He didn't pin it on anybody—yet!" snapped Sheriff Loxley. "But you jes' tacked it on yourself, Horg. By hell, if yuh ain't the dirtiest—"

Cra-ash! Bra-am! Jetting flame stabbed from the hips of Pud and Tate. Darrat heard Hachita grunt, knew that the outlaw was sagging back. At the same instant, Horg went into a quick crouch, clawed for his gun.

"Damn you, Darrat!"

Darrat's palm slapped the ebony butt of his Colt. The heavy gun came up glinting in the faint light striping from the saloon.

It bucked in his fist at the same moment Horg's roared. Twin stripes of powder-fire meshed, faded. Something like a searing poker jabbed through Darrat's shoulder, spun him half around. But from the corner of his eye he saw Horg Farner stumbling forward, arms locked around his stomach, falling.

Bra-am! Cra-ash! The roaring guns came from where Hachita had sagged back following the double blast from Pud and Tate. Darrat saw the old outlaw, blood streaming down his face, standing wide-legged near the saloon hitchrack. His Colts were belching vindictive flame.

"Git him!" yelled someone.

But the lead of the Rio Raider was meant only for two.

Pud Draves screamed, whirled and caught the man beside him. Then he slid face down into the dusty street. Tate, his bucking gun tilted down and exploding harmlessly into the ground, was taking slow, staggering steps backward. His pain-twisted face was turned skyward.

"*Adios,* Polk!" came the voice of Hachita, the Rio Raider. "If yuh ever change your mind, remember your ol' Pop will be waitin' fer yuh!"

And before anyone could stop him, the outlaw sprang into the leather on his own horse there at the saloon rack. He rammed the hooks deep, and like a fleet, black shadow, pounded out of Sage Springs.

Half a dozen Colts were lined on him—but not one spoke. It seemed that those in front of the jail office had abruptly realized the debt they owed the Rio Raider. The hoofbeats died away in the distance.

"But how did yuh dope it that Horg was the gent who robbed the stage an' killed Jeb Olley?" asked Sheriff Loxley of his son. They were standing inside the tiny office a few moments later while the wounds of Darrat and Polk were being dressed. "Everybody was positive it must be Polk."

Darrat watched the ranchers gratefully checking the payrolls he had pulled from the desk drawer where

Hachita had placed them. Then he turned to Polk, the man who once saved his life, and gave him a warm, glowing smile.

"Wal, Pop, a good bit of it was pure hunch an' the firm knowledge that it must be some one else other than Polk," replied Darrat, enjoying his first querly in hours. "Horg knew that all Sage Springs was kinda hopin' that some day Polk would go crooked, prove what they were always claimin'. Horg held a note agin' Polk. He knew that most folks would remember that, too, would add a further reason for Polk pullin' the robbery. He merely took advantage of a swell chance."

"Yuh mean that Horg was dirty enough to rob his own bank, his own friends?"

Darrat smiled and nodded at the rancher who had spoken. "He'd have gotten away with it, too, if it hadn't been for Hachita jumpin' him after the robbery. That's what turned Horg from his usual calm self into a pretty excited hombre, a gent who had to get Polk an' his father to close their mouths. That was my best clue. But I couldn't have proved it against him. Horg had to do that himself—and he did."

The assembled ranchers acted nervous, and Darrat knew they were feeling their shame. He caught most of them casting furtive, reappraising glances at Polk, knew they wanted to find forgiveness in the eyes of the young rancher they had condemned for so long.

It seemed that Polk sensed their discomfiture, too. He turned to young Loxley, grinned as he suggested:

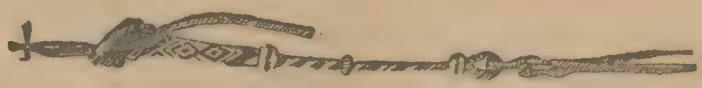
"Yuh know, Darrat, I got a spare beef that's been achin' to be barbecued fer some time. This Saturday would be a pretty good day, an' I figure the new schoolmarm might join us, eh?" He turned to the circle of faces. "How about you men an' your wives?"

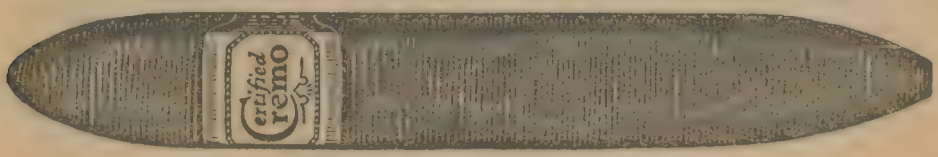
Sheriff Lane Loxley laughed as the men shouted approval. He caught Darrat by the arm and led him to the cell which he and Polk had occupied.

"Son, would yuh mind lockin' up the sheriff of Sage Springs fer a spell?" Loxley's eyes were a bit misty when he spoke.

Darrat smiled, understanding completely his father's remorse for having judged him so wrongly.

"Yuh wouldn't want to miss that barbecue, would yuh?"





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Gunpowder Gambler

The blast seemed to lift the outlaw out of leather bodily.

CHAPTER I

No Guard, No Gold

SIM SLAUGHTER, cowman from Wyoming, narrowly saved himself from pitching to the floor of the rocking stagecoach. "What'n hell ails that fool driver?" he yelled at the laughing cowboy opposite.

Johnny Berdan, brown and lean, tough as rawhide, was making his first trip as shotgun messenger. He was "heeled" for smoke-swapping against stiff odds.

"Driver's all right," he shouted in reply. "Just in a hustle to get over this stretch, where he's come to grief in the past. Been plenty holdups since pay dirt was struck at Gold Butte and the clean-ups have been comin' through."

He patted the "sawed-off" across his knees, and Slaughter looked at it with a slow grin.

"Must be somethin' worth protectin' in the stage boot," the cowman commented above the roar of wheels.

Johnny nodded. The express company was being cagey, or thought it was, by having its new cowboy guard ride inside instead of on the driver's box. Possibly the bandits op-

Gripping Novelette By J. Edward Leithead

Johnny Berdan had built up his renegade reputation better than he suspected. For when he planned an outlaw trick to trap owl-hooters, he overplayed his hair-trigger trumps.

erating the stage road since Gold Butte's boom would shy off in the belief that no shotgun rider to target meant no gold in the boot. But Johnny, fresh from the local Arizona cow range, was loaded to issue one-way boot hill tickets if the express people were betting on a poor hand.

"Hope you ain't carryin' much cash." Johnny grinned at Slaughter, who had explained that his mission in Arizona was to buy bulls and grade stockers for his range in the north. The previous hard winter had left him with a crop of bones and mighty few spring calves.

"Well, say," Slaughter yelped reply to the puncher's question, "they ain't givin' cattle away down here, are they?"

Before the stage hit the rough stretch, Johnny had obliged with a list of cowmen who had stuff to sell, mentioning first the Bar Z Bar. Its owner, Zack Eagles, was his good friend—and, even more important, Madge Eagles was Johnny's girl friend.

Then trouble popped, hell-tailing out of the mesquite in the shape of a dozen bandanna-faced horsebackers. Bristling with blued steel persuasion,

they gave the spiny-whiskered driver his choice of reaching or getting lead through his lights. Riders crowded the lead team of the four-in-hand to a squatting stop. The coach rolled onto the wheelers as old Dan Tyler kicked over the brake-bar.

A flicker of movement inside the coach, as Berdan and Slaughter were hurled against each other by the shuddering halt, caught the eye of the road agent's leader. He spurred alongside the right-hand window, shoving twin death-spreaders across the sill.

"All out!" he rapped.

Too late he saw Berdan crouched back on the cushions, shotgun covering him. The blast of a single barrel, nine buckshot, seemed to lift the outlaw out of leather bodily and slam him sideways to the ground. His horse jumped away, steel-shod hoofs spurning flesh which had turned to clay in a blazing instant.

"A plant!" some masked man yelled, and in a panic drove the spurs home.

Others, influenced by his violent breakaway, went pounding by the coach. They swung guns which drilled lead through the panels and caused the two inmates to sink hastily floorward. With more than half the gang in flight westward, those who had at first stood ground were not disposed to linger. They had thought, before the attack, that there was something unusual about the coach making it run without a guard on top. And at the loss of a leader, they had learned what was wrong. The coach was crowded with express company men! Yes, a dozen or more. Time to hunt the tall timber!

Johnny jerked the door handle and sprang into the road, with Slaughter close at heel. A drag-end rider pitched up his Colt as Johnny swung the sawed-off. With a scream the bandit slid over his mount's rump, falling not far from the stalled Concord.

SIM SLAUGHTER tuned in with barking guns as Johnny fell back on his hip artillery. The latter was too busy to notice that none of the outriding gang was even dusted by the stockman's avid triggering—but it was a significant fact. Though not hired to fight, old Dan Tyler sprawled on the roof and gave his late enemies a smoky farewell.

"They're cuttin' back to the ridge, Johnny," he hollered down. "It's all over like a hoss race."

"The hell it is!" shouted Johnny in reply. He was fight-drunk, determined to wipe out more of the trail pests while he had them on the run. Jabbing Colts in holsters, he raced toward one of the riderless horses, caught the dragging open reins and hooked toe in stirrup while the startled animal was launching into a gallop. It went even faster when Johnny hit leather and got his spurs working. Streaming toward the ridge and rounding its base, the bandits vanished. And Johnny tailed them, riding like a streak.

Dan Tyler muttered in his whiskers about fools going their headlong pace to come-uppance. But he observed that Sim Slaughter was cornering the second riderless bronc, seemingly anxious to ride to Johnny's support, and Dan stopped muttering. Perhaps they'd come back—perhaps not. He saw Slaughter spur away on the road to the ridge, disappear at the bend as the others had done.

Once out of sight of the coach and its driver, Sim Slaughter checked rein abruptly. He slid from the saddle, tossed the buckled reins around a boulder and scrambled up the brushy slope of the ridge. Swiftly he crept along in bent posture, until he had a good view of the trail below, on the west. He spied Johnny immediately, and sank down among the rocks.

The horse Johnny bestrode was limping, as though a shot from the fleeing gang had crippled it. The cow-

boy had turned back, though he was looking toward the west. Squinting under his hat-brim, Slaughter saw the same thing Johnny did—a skyline empty except for spires of rock. The gang had got away.

Stooping, the cowman jerked a Colt and laid the barrel across bent arm. He took a long moment to aim, for it was almost the limit of accurate Colt range, and cramped the trigger. But Johnny's borrowed horse, not Johnny, went floundering to earth.

Surprised by the shot, the express guard's feet were free of the stirrups as the animal dropped. He hunkered behind the horseflesh barrier, and his reloaded Colts spat flaming lead at the smoke mushrooming on the ridge slope. Powdersmoke was all that Berdan could see of his enemy. But had he known it, his close shooting was driving rock chips into Slaughter's tense face.

Sim very shortly decided that he couldn't gamble with such a Colt expert, not with Johnny lying behind that dead horse. He backed out and down the far side of the ridge to his waiting mount, noting with satisfaction that there was scab-rock underfoot and his peg-heeled boots left no impress. Once again in the saddle, he spurred full pelt around the bend, into Berdan's range of vision.

Johnny was now out from behind the horse carcass, maneuvering toward the ridge. But Slaughter dared not take a chance, man to man in the open. The cowboy stopped his crawl, rose to his feet, guns dangling.

"Where's your road agents?" hollered Slaughter. "I'd 'a' got here sooner, only this bronc, not knowin' me, was a mite hard to catch."

"Oh, they're gone—lamed my mount," replied Johnny, standing there and staring. "But some cussed sniper tried to chop me down from the slope. Didn't see him as you came by the foot of the ridge, did you, Slaughter?"

"No, but I heard the shootin'." The cowman drew up beside Johnny. "If you're finished, we might's well mosey back. Get up behind."

BERDAN vaulted on, puzzled and suspicious. It would have been possible for Slaughter to scale the slope and try to drill him, he knew. On the other hand, it could have been one of the bandits who had dropped out, rounding the bend, to flank him from above. On the way back to the stagecoach, Johnny deserted his cantleward seat long enough to scout the slope. Not for tracks he knew he wouldn't find, but the body of his assailant.

He thought the break in the shooting might indicate a lucky shot of his had nailed the man behind the dropfire. Finding no man, nor any horse loose on the slope, he once more faced the broad back of Slaughter and they jogged on eastward.

Back at the stagecoach, the cowboy found that Dan Tyler had pulled the eyeholed bandannas from the faces of the slain bandits. He wasn't surprised when the driver announced:

"It looks like you got the leader, Johnny. Here's the hombre most of us suspected—Bill Durg!"

Berdan slid into the road. "Uh-huh. Bill was a slick cow thief, that couldn't be caught with the goods, until the treasure coaches made the stick-up business look more profitable."

Slaughter quit the saddle and walked over to look into the still faces. Certainly he betrayed no emotion that Johnny could discern—and the cowboy was watching covertly.

Afterward, Slaughter helped Berdan and the driver load the two bandits into the coach. But the shotgun messenger's head was as busy as his hands. He was determined to learn where Slaughter fit into this episode of the trail. Johnny stepped toward the dead outlaw's horse, picked up the reins and flicked out a gun. He

amazed Dan Tyler by demanding the strongbox.

"You're foolin', Johnny!"

"One of the damn road agents yourself, hey!" snorted Slaughter virtuously.

"Yeh—and shootin' if I have to!" Johnny looked grim enough to convince even Dan Tyler, who knew him well. The oldster dipped an arm toward the boot and wrenched out the express box, passing it over to the turncoat with a curse. Johnny sidled toward his horse, stepped into the saddle, with the heavy, clumsy box supported by one arm. If they had showed fight, he'd have had to drop it. But the driver and Slaughter were keeping hands away from guns, bristling like a couple of wolves cheated of a veal dinner. Johnny spoke to Sim direct.

"Anything you might have to buy your passel of cows with, Slaughter, would be chicken feed alongside what's in this box. I'm no hawg, so I ain't friskin' you. So-long."

He spurred away, holding his gun on the two men while in gunrange. He had a distinct purpose in not making the supposed cowman shell out. Sim Slaughter might be honest, after all, but if he were not, Johnny wanted to leave a loophole for friendship later on.

CHAPTER II

Gun-notchers' Roost

THE looted stage, as Johnny knew, would not reach the end of its run, Hondo Forks, rail and cattle town, until after dark. He rode south, then eastward again, and by a short cut, reached the Forks at nightfall, well ahead of the coach. Entering town by the back lots, Johnny reined up behind the express office. The rear door was kept locked and the cowboy had to hammer up Dade Kelly, the agent, who got the surprise of his life when the stealthy visitor lurched in with the express box.

"Boy, I'm glad to get this off my hands!" Johnny exclaimed. "Pull down the office blinds, Dade, and we'll lock 'er in the company safe, to go aboard the eastbound tomorrow."

Agent Kelly hurried to the front of the stout log shack, where a kerosene lamp burned, while Johnny waited in the dark at the rear. When Kelly called, he went forward. As the canvas sacks of clean-up were being transferred to the huge iron safe, the cowboy explained the situation and what he planned to do.

"Old Danny Tyler," he ended up, "will be in soon, hollerin' his head off that I've turned bandit. Let that get around, for I'm workin' the outlaw trick to trap owl-hooters. Not only the rest of Bill Durg's gang, whoever they are, but likewise this mysterious cowman from Wyoming, if he's a crook. On the quiet, Dade, put the driver wise, but tell him to keep shut."

"If you run into Durg's pards they're likely to pop you off on sight for blastin' him," suggested the express agent.

"Maybe, maybe not. I'm a gunpowder gambler," grinned Johnny Berdan. "If I wasn't, I'd never taken up this stage guard job. I'll be ready for anything or try to be, because I've got a little claim staked at Gold Butte myself. I aim to go back and work it after the stage road's been made safe for dust shipments."

"Where you headin' now?"

"To Zack Eagles' ranch. And I'm turnin' in my sawed-off, for this'll be six-shooter business from now on, Dade. I want to let the old folks and Madge in on the deal, so's they won't think I've really gone owl-hooter. Besides, I expect Slaughter to show up there and I want to see how he acts at a second meetin'. Figurin' to throw some business Zack's way, I told Slaughter to go see him. But I dunno now whether he's a fake or straight goods."

"Well, good luck," said Kelly. "Though it looks to me like a chunk

you'll splinter your teeth on, Johnny!"

But Johnny only laughed as he jingled forth by the back door, mounted and swung south. The Eagles family, father, mother and daughter were not abed, but preparing to go, when young Berdan presented himself in the living room, sometime later. Warmly welcomed, he was listened to with close attention, and presently Zack and his wife retired, the rancher saying as he went:

"Count on our support, Johnny. Find yourself a bunk with the boys, and stay as long as you like."

Left alone with Madge, Johnny forgot his worries. It would have been hard to do otherwise in the company of the prettiest range girl in the district. Madge was slim and straight, tanned a healthy brown. Golden curls clustered thickly upon the small head, and Johnny had a strong desire to run his fingers caressingly through them.

"I don't like this overmuch," she said, one hand on his leather-clad knee. "I mean, going after the gang on your high lonesome."

"Listen, honey." He dropped his hand over her own, completely smothering it. "It'll mean weddin' bells for us—sooner than if I stuck at punchin' some other man's cows."

"No wedding bells if they shoot you to doll rags," she reminded soberly.

"Aw, cheer up, honey!" he tried to laugh away her fear. "Never knew you to be scared about anything before. I'll come through. Now, let's talk about our gold claim at the Butte and how it'll pan out."

HE hung around the Bar Z Bar the next day, wondering if Sim Slaughter would come. But the morning passed and Sim hadn't arrived. Johnny fidgeted. Perhaps the Wyoming man had gone to one of the other ranches. Late in the afternoon, however, a horse *clip-clopped* into the yard. Berdan, peering from a bunkhouse window, saw the stocky figure of Slaughter dismount at the main dwelling. He had no doubt hired saddle and horse at the Hondo Forks livery stable.

The cowboy gave Slaughter time to get into conversation with Zack Eagles, then sauntered up from the bunkhouse. He passed Madge in the hall and she nodded her head toward her father's office.

"You keep out of the way, case I've got to run for it," he whispered in passing, patting her shoulder.

Then he stepped through the office doorway, a cigarette hanging carelessly from his lips. Deep in a discussion of cattle prices, Zack and his caller looked up. Sim Slaughter leaned back in his chair, eyes narrowing when he saw who had entered.

"Howdy, Slaughter?" said Johnny, and stopped just inside the doorway. He noticed that the visiting cowman pressed the toes of his boots hard upon the floor, as though preparing to rise suddenly. Seated, he couldn't jerk a gun with the speed necessary to shade Johnny's draw, for he had had a sample of the other's gun-conjuring.

"Mr. Berdan again, eh?" exclaimed Slaughter grimly. "So they ain't caught you yet!" He flicked a glance at Zack, who looked properly astonished. "I don't doubt you run a straight ranch, Mr. Eagles, and wouldn't have a holdup man hidin' out here if you knew it. No word has reached you, I reckon, that this fellow robbed the stage between Gold Butte and Hondo Forks yesterday!"

He was out of his chair with the last words, slapping hands to gun stocks. But Johnny, spitting his cigarette on the floor, already had him and Zack covered.

"This true, Johnny?" flared Zack, acting his part to the limit. "I've knowed you a long time—"

"Yeh; and don't reach, Zack, if you don't want to get plugged!" gritted Berdan. "Here's where I make my exit!"

He backed into the hallway, raced for the porch. And as he tore down

the yard, straight for the horse left saddled at the corral for this emergency, the gunfire of Slaughter and Eagles slashed the afternoon silence. He topped his mount and rode out as the rancher and his visitor were thudding corralward. On the porch, as he screwed in the saddle for a last look, he saw Madge standing, waving her hand. He answered by flourishing a pistol, and both Zack and Sim ducked, the latter thinking he was about to drop lead close by.

But there was no pursuit, and Johnny knew that Zack had persuaded Slaughter it wasn't any use. He continued riding, while night overtook him. It appeared, from Slaughter's action, as though he were honest. Yet Johnny had a lingering doubt. And having worked his first lead without definite results, the cowboy had another card to play.

Many miles south of Hondo Forks and the Eagles outfit, on the edge of the hills, lay an adobe town of unsavory repute—Gore's Crossing. Once it had been a roadhouse at the rock-bottomed ford of Apache River, where cattle drivers crossed their herds. But now it was a collection of 'dobes, a store, saloons, gambling hells and dance halls, the known resort of owl-hoot riders of all kinds.

Before he shotgunned Bill Durg on the stage road yesterday, Johnny Berdan could not be certain that Durg was leader of the stage robbers. Otherwise, he might have picked him up at Gore's Crossing previously. Even yet he didn't know what particular owl-hooters who made rendezvous there were enlisted under Durg. But by boldly exhibiting himself at the Crossing he was, for several reasons, sure to draw the gang to him. Whether it would result in his own blotting out or a tie-up with the gun-riders, was a big question, but Johnny had the steely guts to face it.

LONG past nightfall he forded the Apache and swung at a right angle between the rows of 'dobes, a narrow lane where bullets often whined their song of death. He'd never been there before, so he picked a saloon at random, tied up at the rack, and elbowed through the bat-wing doors. Only one man was in front of the bar, conversing with the swart barkeep. Johnny hardly had time to scan the lone drinker's features from under slanted hat-brim when the man was sidling doorward. He ducked out suddenly, and Johnny grinned at the staring Mexican.

"Must know me—and not any good of me. Rye straight!"

He took but the one drink and afterward stood with his back to the bar, watching that door. Johnny knew that he had been recognized, probably by one of Durg's men. And he believed the owl-hooter had gone to gather the rest of the gang from another resort in the outlaw town.

He was right. Booted feet were pounding the dirt in a steady march on the saloon Johnny Berdan had entered. But Bill Durg's gang, minus its leader, was divided in opinion as to what should be done with Bill's slayer. Nels Prescott, grizzled and bandy-legged, opined that Berdan ought to be ganged and gunned. He contended that Johnny, being tough, would hold fast to the secret of his gold cache.

"Hell with the dust!" Nels ended his argument. "Kill Berdan!"

But six-footer Dex Cuneo differed with Nels, voiced the sentiment of the majority: don't jump Berdan, make friends or appear to, and when the hiding-place of the buried strongbox was either wheedled or tortured out of him, then let him have it.

Still divided in opinion, the gang surged into the saloon. There were ten of them. They had numbered a dozen before that other meeting with Berdan, an unusually large gang for stage-robbing, but originally they had lifted cattle for a living, which required more men.

With the solid mahogany at his back, arms dangling, Johnny Berdan faced them, chill-eyed. The purposeful

thud of peg heels, the low clink of spurs, ended suddenly, the newcomers splitting ranks as if at a silent signal. On spraddled legs, Nels Prescott halted at pointblank range. His arms were stiffly bent, fingers spread above Colt handles.

Yet the tense-faced cowboy didn't move. Only his frosty eyes seemed alive and the menace in their depths penetrated to the marrow of the warlike Prescott. He shot tongue over lips, fighting a spine-tingling sensation which was the icy hand of fear stroking his backbone. Seldom had it touched the tough-cut gunslinger in the past. While the deadly silence held, it was evident he was tugging at courage with desperate fingers. The scarred features worked convulsively, suddenly blazed with upsurging blood and the flame of hatred.

"What're you here for?" screeched Nels in the high key of murderous rage. "You won't find no friends in this town after blowin' Bill Durg apart!"

Johnny Berdan didn't like the way the gang had separated—four in front of him, six off to one side. They'd get him both ways. But his backbone stiffened like a steel rod. He'd come looking for trouble; here it was in arm's reach. Yet he couldn't help likening the small, bandy-legged and noisy Prescott to a wing-flapping gamecock, and a grim smile curved his lips.

"I ain't huntin' friends, old rooster!" he barked at Prescott. "Make your play!"

Steel flashed in both Prescott's hands. But Johnny was the quicker, and Nels was falling on his face before smoke hazed the muzzles of his rearing guns. Back to bar, the cowboy lashed lead into a wry-necked outlaw who had stood on Prescott's left. The fellow's guns tilted ceilingward after boring holes in the bar front, inches from Johnny's spread legs. A shower of 'dobe chips showered the two men heaped on the floor.

With two down and unstirring, the fast-thumbing Berdan wondered that bullets from the group of six hadn't already swept him off his feet. They opened up as the second man stumbled across Nels Prescott, a roaring blast that seemed to rock the cantina. And it was a surprise to Johnny that he didn't feel the shock of lead whipping through to his vitals.

Nels Prescott's third supporter keeled over with a scream of agony. Johnny had hit him. And so, apparently, had the man's own saddlemates. Berdan was no longer in doubt of his senses when the fourth outlaw who had held opinion with Prescott, breaking for the door as he realized his slim chance of survival, folded at the knees. He struck on his face, guns sliding from nerveless fingers, and never moved after that.

Berdan swiveled his guns bearing on the group of six. If smoke-drumming with them was next in order, he had the lead to tally them in his death-spreaders. But the tallest of the lot, Dex Cuneo, shoved smoking Colts in holsters and thrust a hand up, with the palm outward.

"You wouldn't shoot your friends, would you, Johnny?" Dex Cuneo rumbled. "Nels Prescott was a little mite mistaken when he said you wouldn't find men to side you at Gore's Crossin'. Proved it, ain't we?"

CHAPTER III

Bandit Bait

JOHNNY BERDAN let the muzzles of his Colts sag, acting as though he half doubted the sincerity of the big outlaw. Dex Cuneo, taking a step forward, declared:

"They'd 'a' got you, hadn't we chipped in! How'd you like to throw in with us? And since we sided you, it would only be fair to cut us in on the treasure you lifted off the Gold Butte stage."

Johnny knew that was coming, and was quite aware of the possibilities opened up to him by this show of

friendship. He leathered his six-shooters and shook hands with Cuneo.

"You're on, pard! I do owe you somethin' for takin' cards!" Johnny said. "But what do I call you—and the rest here?"

Dex introduced them one by one, with a flourish of his big paw, and then they paraded to the bar at Johnny's invitation. He knew that it was greed and greed only which had prompted them to take up his end of the fight-stick. A dead man couldn't tell them where that gold was hidden. But the moment it fell into their hands, Johnny felt that he could expect them to turn on him with equal savagery. Indeed, he considered the four who had tried to avenge Bill Durg as men of better fiber than these six gun-hung wolves who had killed their own saddlemates in a frenzy of avarice.

"I knowed you'd do the right thing by us, Johnny," Dex Cuneo said, wiping his mouth backhanded and dropping the hand heavily on the cowboy's shoulder. "Now, where at did you stack the strongbox? Far from here?"

Berdan shrugged off the heavy hand and drew the makings from vest pocket. "It's a little bit public here to discuss that, ain't it, Dex?"

"Oh, Tony wouldn't open his head." Cuneo glanced sidelong and menacingly at the Mexican bartender. "He knows better! But come over here in the corner."

The seven of them surrounded a table, yanking up chairs. And as tobacco-smoke hazed the room, Nels Prescott and his mates lying on the floor unnoticed like slaughtered hogs, Johnny craftily baited his trap. Without actually revealing the supposed hiding-place of the mythical gold dust, the cowboy said it was buried close by Hondo Forks, the last place the stage or express people would look for it.

His purpose was, of course, to lure the gang as near the town as possible, so that he could get help to capture or drill them down. To the gold-crazy outlaws it sounded plausible, and privately Dex Cuneo was thinking: "We're six to one, anyhow. He can't come no tricks on us."

"When do you boys want to start?" Johnny's glance shuttled from one hard face to another around the board. "Too late to go tonight, I reckon."

"Yeh," agreed Cuneo. "But we'll want to get there after dark, so nobody spots us. We'll ride north sometime tomorrow afternoon."

THUS it was settled, and that night Johnny bunked in at Gore's Crossing, loafed until past noon of the next day with his unsavory comrades. It eased the strain of thinking about the wind-up when Cuneo issued the call for "quirts and saddles." Not long afterward the seven riders splashed over the Crossing and took the rail north.

As they aimed to strike the neighborhood of Hondo Forks after nightfall, their way led them ultimately by a south fenced pasture of the Bar Z Bar, Zack's ranch. It was then late afternoon. As the gang advanced, bunched cattle were seen on the grazing ground, an unusual number to be grouped in one spot. But the stock was apparently too excited to graze. The Cuneo men commented on the size of the herd, for in the past they had nicked Zack on many a moonless night.

Cuneo, standing in his stirrups, said: "Looks like somebody's been roundin' up, but I don't see no cowhands."

They were not a dozen yards from the barbed wire now, riding parallel to it. Suddenly out of the herd-stirred dust a lone horseman came loping toward the fence corner. Johnny Berdan stiffened as he recognized Sim Slaughter. Then, noting the hands of his companions sliding toward guns, he said in a low voice:

"Hold it, boys! He can't make us

any trouble. It's the sage-popper that was in the stage with me yesterday. See what he has to say."

Slaughter was making the peace sign and grinning as though glad to meet Johnny again, yet doubtful of his reception. The cowboy had pulled over to the fence and stopped, and at Cuneo's nod, the rest wheeled after him.

"You're just the man I want to see, Johnny," Slaughter declared, reining up with the wire between them, and displaying steely nerve in the focus of those hostile stares. "Matter of fact, I owe you an apology for the way I acted yesterday. But I had to put up front. Zack Eagles would've knowed about you sooner or later, and learned that I knowed what you was. If I'd kept quiet, he'd have figured I was friendly with outlaws, don't you see, and wouldn't have been so ready to make a deal with me."

" 'Friendly with outlaws,' " repeated Johnny. "Meanin'—"

"Well—" Slaughter took up his pause, looking them over with keenly critical eye—"if you and these hombres are on the make together, I might have an interestin' proposition. Easy pickin's and safe. But somethin' I can't handle alone, and only with the right men."

"We sure ain't honin' to brace any sheriffs," admitted Johnny, hiding his eagerness. "What're these cattle here? Stuff you bought from Zack Eagles?"

"Yeh. Three hundred head—all he cared to sell off. I'm leasin' pasture from him to hold the herd on while I visit other cowmen, and—" Sim digressed abruptly. "Come on inside! We can talk better at my wagon over yonder. Bought it cheap off Eagles. There's a gate quarter mile up this side."

BUT Dex Cuneo, one gloved hand clasping the top strand of wire, frowned. "*Nada!* No time to stop now —we're on important business. And say, it's lucky for you none of your shots nicked us the other day. We'd have a little score to settle!"

"I never shoot straight at boys ridin' outside the law, pardner," Slaughter said calmly. "If you noticed, I aimed high. Wanted Johnny to think I was sidin' him. I didn't know him so well then as I do now." Possibly he wondered how Berdan had made himself so solid with the renegade crew, after the killings he tallied that other afternoon. The frown left Cuneo's broad face and Slaughter added slyly:

"What's the important business? Robbin' the stage again or a bank maybe?"

"No," Johnny Berdan broke in quickly. "But just what is this game of yours? We can come back this way if it's worth the trouble."

Sim looked behind, as if to make sure no listeners were on his side of the barbed wire.

"I'll give you the details, then," he said, facing front again. "I need fellows like you. Recollect Johnny said you'd been liftin' cattle before you tried stage-robbin'. Eagles wanted to lend me some cowhands, but I told him I'd hire my own men—meanin' to look you up, Johnny. Puttin' it plain, boys, I'm expectin' to drive a lot more cows out of this country than I'm payin' cash for, savvy?"

Johnny Berdan nodded, concealing his surprise as Slaughter went further into his plan. And from the attention the owl-hoot riders were giving the speaker, it was apparent they were equally astonished at his ingenuity. The best cattle-rustling scheme that had come to their notice, bar none!

"It's a matter," said Sim, "of buildin' up two herds. Them that I buy will be held on the Bar Z Bar lease, the others that are lifted with the help of you boys will be driven to a holdout, not too far away, yet safe. Maybe

you know such a place?" he appealed to Dex Cuneo.

The big long-rider said he did, emphatically. A place used by Bill Durg's gang, abandoned since the strike at Gold Butte, but never discovered by the sheriff.

"Just what you want, Slaughter!" Dex asserted. "When we've collected a big herd in the holdout, what next?"

"We throw the two bunches together and move out north—not to Wyoming. It ain't my home, really," Sim grinned. "And we'll sell every head at big profit long before we drive that far. If any cowman misses stock before I'm ready to leave, suspicion'll never point a finger at me. It'll be thought that the Bill Durg boys are back at the old game."

"I don't like that none," grumbled Cuneo.

"Hell, you'll be safe—workin' for me," Slaughter pointed out. "Because no outsiders know exactly who was in the Durg game, I understand from Zack Eagles. That right, Johnny?"

"Sure is. I didn't know myself till last night at Gore's Crossin'." And Johnny grinned twistedly at Cuneo, whose brow had cleared.

"It's better you fellows lay off the stage line for a while, anyhow," Slaughter argued shrewdly. "After our friend Johnny got away with that rich haul, the express company will likely send a little army of shotgunners with every shipment for some time, and you'd get bucked down. I'm ready to hire all seven of you from now on until I drive out of the country, and after that. Permanent jobs if we hit it off together—and we will."

Johnny looked at Cuneo, and Cuneo nodded, then faced the others. The answer was easily read in their hard, steel-chip eyes.

"It's a deal, then, Slaughter," confirmed Cuneo, lifting slack reins. "See you later on tonight."

And the cavalcade broke into a trot toward Hondo Forks.

CHAPTER IV

Hot Lead in Hondo

JOHNNY'S hopes were riding high as he jogged on at Cuneo's stirrup. Their pace was a road-jog, for it wasn't far to Hondo Forks now. There was still a half hour of daylight, though the sun swung low in the west. Clattering over a little used trail to town, Johnny and his owl-hoot companions had no expectation of meeting anyone. But as they rode within a hundred yards of a drawhead, a band of riders emerged, bound in the same direction.

There were nine of them, cowhands from the Lazy Eight spread, whom Johnny knew well. No doubt they were bent on a night in Hondo Forks. But when they caught sight of the cavalcade coming up the road, all that was changed. It happened suddenly, chiefly because the leading cowboys recognized Johnny Berdan at once. Not as a range-riding pal, but as an owl-hooter with a price on his head. So well had Dade Kelly, the express agent, carried out Johnny's instructions that express company money was upon Johnny, wedge-cold or alive and kicking. And every cowhand ranging these parts looked upon the masquerading stage guard as fair game for Colt practice.

"I'll be damned," exclaimed one cowboy, loud enough for Johnny and the outlaws to hear, "if there ain't a thousand bucks a-ridin' up the trail, a-waitin' to be took! See him, don'tcha—Johnny Berdan?"

The speech startled Johnny even more than the appearance of the cowpunchers had startled his companions. But he realized what it meant, that he himself had encouraged the build-up of an outlaw name that none could doubt was genuine. He thought fast and acted. There was but one chance for him that he could see. The cowboys were wheeling in the road above, unslinging six-shooters.

"They're lookin' for trouble. Let's go for 'em!" Johnny glanced at Dex

Cuneo and flipped out his guns. But he meant to shoot high when he triggered.

Cuneo, however, was not disposed to a pitched battle if it could be avoided. Nothing was to be gained by fighting these cowhands, who outnumbered them by two men. He was slowing his horse, when Johnny kicked his own mount into a run. Johnny didn't look back to see if the rest were following. He rocked on his way with silent guns, praying that the punchers wouldn't open fire—yet.

Suspicion smote Dex Cuneo, a shrewd man in his way. It wasn't reasonable that Johnny would willingly face such odds alone, and he knew the outlaws were not charging with him. The nine cowpunchers would drill him to red rags—unless they were his friends and he was playing a game to dupe Cuneo's crew! Dex's right hand dipped, swept outward, and flame lanced toward the hard-riding Johnny. He wilted in the saddle, leaned sideways, and another jump of his horse pitched him into the road.

"He was swappin' sides. I know it!" gritted Cuneo, briefly facing his mates, who were filling their hands. "Here they come! Stand your ground!"

Volleying, the punchers were riding their spurs in a wild charge at the moment Berdan fell. They had no doubt his companions were outlaws, too. It was not thought of gold or glory which urged them on—the honest cowhand was the prop and mainstay of law and order wherever found.

But the outlaws stood fast, on horses that weren't gun-shy. Cowboys were stopping straight-aimed lead before their racing mounts had reached Johnny, lying in the road. They thought him dead, and though it had surprised them when Cuneo tossed a gun on Berdan's back, they made no effort to seize the man who was supposedly worth a certain sum on the hoof or slaughtered. Two saddles had been swept clean, and the Lazy Eight band wheeled under the hot fire. Cuneo and his gang pressed the advantage, sweeping forward with guns aflame.

JOHNNY, at that juncture, half revived, and began pawing over the ground in search of his Colts, dropped when he was slung from the saddle. He wasn't in such a fog but that he knew south from north, and that the hoofbeats roaring nearer every second were those of his late outlaw-mates.

But his hands were still empty, as he crawled painfully about, when a horseman came so close it seemed he must be going to override the cowboy. Johnny rose up unsteadily, raising bare fists, as the animal reared. He had a hazy glimpse of Dex Cuneo's face, bestial with fury. Then the outlaw's right arm descended, his gun swatting Johnny flat and utterly out. His horse at a fretting halt, Dex leaned far down, seized Johnny by his two-gun belt and hoisted him across the saddle.

"Far enough!" Cuneo yelled at his mates. And with Colt smoking across Johnny's lax body, he swung his mount with the other hand. "They're takin' to cover. Back away!"

The Lazy Eight cowhands had slipped from saddles and crouched behind any rock or bush that offered the slightest shelter. They were good fighting men, and two comrades had dropped in the leadstorm. But it wasn't going to be said of Lazy Eight cowboys that they had been sent high-tailing for home by any bunch of owl-hooters. Wisely did Cuneo order retreat. He had got his hands on Johnny Berdan alive and the man who had duped them should suffer a death that wasn't easy, to pay for his treachery.

In the lengthening evening shadows, the outlaws drew off southward, facing the cowpunchers with flaming guns until the range became too long for six-shooter accuracy. Both sides

kept their guns hot, and when the Lazy Eight stockhands saw their enemies in full retreat, one puncher suggested that they make it a running fight, no matter where the chase led.

But by the time their scattered horses, less accustomed to gunplay than the owl-hooters' mounts, had been rounded up, Dex Cuneo's men, digging in spurs, had long been out of sight. Not even their hoofbeats echoed back. After some argument among themselves, the Lazy Eight riders reached the conclusion that hunting the gang in the dark, when there was certainty of ambush along the way, would be riding their luck too far. They'd get the sheriff at Hondo Forks, and come back with a big posse—if not tonight, then tomorrow. In due time they entered town with their slain saddle-mates.

Their coming created even more of a stir than they had expected, not only in the sheriff's office but in the express office. Hearing that Johnny had been wounded, if not killed, Dade Kelly went up in the air.

He explained about Johnny's undercover rôle, adding: "And you fellows had to gum up his game just when he was fetchin' in the road-agent gang!"

The jaws of the Lazy Eight boys went slack, but one found his voice.

"Well, how'n hell did we know? Johnny was always our good pal, but we thought he'd backslid. Your company offered a reward for him, Dade, so I heard. What if we'd brought him in?"

"I reckon we overplayed our hand," replied Dade Kelly. "Instead of helpin' Johnny out, we got him in wrong. Wish you fellows had been wise to things. Don't doubt he was tryin' to join you. But now we've got to find him, whether he's dead or alive."

That was up to Sheriff Holden, and he had no trouble in deputizing all the men he needed, and more. But the start of the search wasn't made until sunup. The posse headed first to the Bar Z Bar, for Dade Kelly remembered that Johnny had suspected Sim Slaughter of being an outlaw, and Sim was known to have ridden off toward Zack's ranch. Some clue to aid them in picking up Johnny's trail might be obtained there.

But Zack Eagles, in good faith, O. K.'d Slaughter.

"Yeh, he's been here—still is," the cowman told the sheriff. "Bought some cows off me and is leasin' a south pasture of mine to hold the herd he's gatherin'. Go see him if you like, but he dunno nothin' about Johnny and them owl-hooters."

"I won't waste time, then," said the sheriff, who hadn't left the saddle. "You say Johnny talked of goin' to Gore's Crossin', so that'll be our next stop, though I doubt we get any information there."

MADGE EAGLES stood beside her father on the porch, her brow deeply worry-lined when she heard what had happened to Johnny. She startled her father and the peace officer by asking:

"How'd you like to deputize me to go along, sheriff? I'd like to join this search. I mean it!"

"Guess you'd be a help and no hindrance, at that," chuckled Sheriff Holden. "But I've got a bigger posse than I really need, already. Say Johnny is one lucky hombre if you ask me, Madge. He just can't be dead, knowin' how you're interested. And we'll find him. Let's go, boys!"

Riding southward for Gore's Crossing, they passed nowhere near Slaughter's cow camp in the south pasture. Nor would they have found Johnny or any of the Durg gang there, at that time.

Hours earlier it would have been different, for the line of the outlaws' flight had taken them back to that corner of the Bar Z Bar range. Two of Cuneo's men had wounds that needed dressing. They were losing blood at every jump of their horses, and

Cuneo still intended tying up with the crooked cowman. They knew where to find a gate in the miles of barbed wire. Skirting Slaughter's bedded down herd, they rode on toward his wagon. He had a fire burning beside it, but wasn't in evidence until he had made certain, peering from behind the wagon, who his visitors were.

"You're back sooner'n I expected," Slaughter exclaimed, stepping into the flame-light and sheathing his shooting-irons. "Uh course, I dunno just where you were headin', but—Hell, ain't that Johnny on your saddle, Cuneo? Did he get shot up?"

With a curse Dex hurled the senseless body to the turf and followed it. The shock of the fall caused Johnny to push upward on outspread arms and look about him in a daze. More than anything else the hate-filled visage of Dex bending over him and the glint of blued steel shoved in his face, served to restore the cowboy's normal comprehension.

"Hey, what're you doin', Cuneo?" Slaughter jerked out in astonishment.

Johnny knew, then, where he was. He sat up, with a cold disregard for Dex and his gun. They had him, and what the hell could he do about it?

"I'm goin' to kill this lyin' skunk!" roared Dex. "He was playin' us a trick, workin' for the express company to get us, all the time. He didn't have no strongbox buried. . . . Did you, Berdan?"

"No, you big walloper," retorted Johnny coolly. "I turned it over to Dade Kelly the night of the holdup. Bet you ain't got the nerve to cross my paw with gun-steel and scrap it out! Your shot in the back didn't finish me, though it hurts plenty."

"Say, now," Slaughter stepped closer. "He ain't no friend of mine, Cuneo. But if he's still workin' for the express outfit, he might be useful to us. Hostage, you know, in case the unexpected happens before we drive north. It's always well to have an ace in the hole."

Dex Cuneo bent his attention—and his gun—on Sim Slaughter. Cuneo's mates stood around in attitudes of open suspicion. Such talk from Slaughter didn't sound right to their ears.

"I half believe you're workin' with this double-crossin' son!" said Dex harshly.

"You're a blamed fool!" Slaughter accused him. He looked down Cuneo's gun with such a nerveless stare that the big outlaw wavered and Johnny, on the ground, grinned his appreciation. "I'm a cautious man, that's all. Never flirted with a hangnoose, never been in jail—because I think ahead. Your brains must be somewhere in your boots! We can kill Johnny when we go, just as easy as we can now. And we can't be sure when he'll come in handy alive."

"Hear your boss talkin', don'tcha, Dex?" Johnny chuckled.

Evidently Dex did. At least he was convinced that the outwardly respectable Slaughter was a thorough wolf, one of his own kind, and smart enough to follow. He put up his gun and prodded Johnny with a savage boot.

"Laugh while you can, you lousy jigger!"

Slaughter said: "I'm handy doctorin' gunshot wounds, and if you hit him in the back, reckon I'd better have a look at it. I'll fix up your other boys, too. Then we'll light out of here. I want to see that hole in the hills where we're goin' to cache the cows. And leave Johnny there, under guard."

While he was dressing the prisoner's wound by firelight, Johnny turned a grinning face and remarked: "Reckon I ought to thank you for your kindness, Sim, old cow-stealer!"

"Don't bother," Slaughter replied, frosty-eyed. "I'll be the first to pitch a slug into you when your usefulness is past!"

CHAPTER V

Battle-Scarred Buckaroo

JOHNNY BERDAN'S cup of woe was brimming over. Nobody would find him in this cattle hold-out of the rustlers, even if anyone were looking. Dex Cuneo had asserted, when they rode into the off-trail canyon, far south of the grazing district, that no lawman yet had put his nose in at their door. And Johnny believed him after a day of lying trussed up in an old shack, with a cigarette-sucking guard across the room.

The cowboy became absolutely heartsick when, late on the second night of his captivity, he heard the bawling of cattle being shoved through the canyon's single opening. Its upper end was high-walled and a barrier of logs at the front kept the stuff penned in. There was grass and water, so the cattle would not suffer. But it riled Johnny to hear them out there. Some friend of his had been raided that night.

"If I was only loose and had a smoker, wouldn't I make that gang sick?" he lamented to the empty room, lighted by a smoky coal-oil lamp, for his guard had left at the first sound of the raiders' arrival.

A new guard, one of those who had been night riding, came in with Slaughter and Cuneo. It was thus arranged, so that no one man should get an overdose of monotonous guard duty. Drinking on the job was strictly prohibited, because the leaders regarded Johnny as a decidedly slippery customer. They couldn't chance his getting loose and wandering back north. After seeing with their own eyes that Johnny was still on tap, Sim and Dex departed, their ears stuffed with the finest cussing Berdan could unload.

His new guard proved to be a little more chummy than the cigarette-sucker. Producing a greasy card deck, the owl-hooter tied the prisoner's wrists together in front, instead of behind, so that, when the table was pushed close to his bunk, Johnny could manage playing in a hobbled sort of way. All the while he was trying to figure out a breakaway, but nothing came of it.

The third night of his imprisonment was like the second; that is, toward morning, the trampling and lowing of a stolen beef bunch was heard echoing in the canyon. Johnny cursed his helplessness. His back wound was healing nicely. He scarcely felt it. But what good did that do him?

He was ready with his invective when Sim and Dex dropped in as usual. The latest guard preceded them with his rigging, which, unobserved by the others, he deposited with extra care in a corner.

Johnny didn't know it, nor did his captors suspect, but the law was on the verge of having its inning in this crooked game of cattle. And one gunpowder gambler was to have his chance at powder-burning.

It came about because of a girl. Madge Eagles was no sit-at-home who fed her worries in a porch rocker and did nothing about them, particularly not when it was Johnny Berdan who caused her anxiety. She loved him intensely.

On that third morning, when the sheriff hadn't been heard from, indicating that Johnny's fate was yet unknown, Madge saddled, and rode south on the Bar Z Bar range. There had been something about Slaughter's cattle deal that aroused the girl's distrust. A little item which evidently hadn't impressed her father, since he had made no comment.

Noting it at the time Sim bought the three hundred Bar Z Bars, it had not recurred to Madge herself until this morning. Then, no news seeming bad news to her, she had racked her mind for some clue that would put the manhunters on the right track.

Why was it, she asked herself, that Sim Slaughter had refused Zack's offer of the aid of Bar Z Bar cowboys? He needed men, not to watch the

cattle in the fenced pasture, but to drive bunches to that point from other outfits. He might be up to something in which honest cowboys would not mix. And Madge was riding that morning to look over Slaughter's camp from a distance.

THERE was a lot of dust and milling of stock, and she did her scouting unobserved. For Slaughter, not forgetting to keep up appearances, had just driven in a hundred purchased cattle from a nearby range, with the assistance of Cuneo and four owl-hoot riders. It was wearing on the thieves, to be riding daytime and night, with only a few hours of rest between. But they were a tough lot and Slaughter promised large reward.

The moment she spied the six-foot Cuneo among the men at Sim's camp, Madge Eagles knew that she had something on Sim. She didn't recall ever having heard Dex Cuneo's name mentioned, but she had seen him twice in the company of Bill Durg.

Everybody had known Bill—without the bandanna he affected when he took up stage robbing—and not much good of him, either. But no hanging proof had ever been turned up until Johnny put nine buckshot in the right part of Bill's anatomy. And since Bill Durg had been a suspected owl-hooter, naturally anyone who rode about with him fell under the same suspicion of guilt. Knowing this, Madge Eagles hung in her spurs and flashed homeward, without Slaughter and his stock raiders being any the wiser.

"That fellow is Dex Cuneo, if I recollect the name, and he's got a shady rep," Zack Eagles declared, when the breathless Madge had described the six-footer. "It looks bad, honey, though Slaughter may have hired him without knowin' what Cuneo is. Let's ride to town and see if Holden has got back."

The sheriff had, twelve hours before. But when the cowman and his daughter dropped their reins before his office door, and Madge had told what she had seen, the peace officer rose up and buckled on his guns again.

"Girl," he said to Madge, "if we find Johnny, he'll have you to thank for it. Tell you why. Cuneo must know where he is, for the Lazy Eight hands declare he was the fellow that shot Johnny in the back, and Dex wasn't at Gore's Crossin'. It might be Slaughter innocently hired Dex, as your pappy says. But on the other hand, the two of 'em may be workin' together on a big cattle steal. For since I've been away there was a night haul of stock made at the Rockin' T ranch. Just got the report. We'll visit the Bar Z Bar south pasture, which maybe we ought've done in the first place."

There were plenty of cowpunchers in town, only too eager to go along if there was a fresh clue to Johnny Berdan's whereabouts. Madge rode anxiously with the sheriff and her father as the cavalcade thundered south from Hondo Forks. They found the Bar Z Bar cattle that Zack had sold, grazing alongside those of another local brand, but men and horses were gone.

"Everything looks straight enough here," the sheriff commented. "No stolen cattle. But we'll wait till Slaughter comes back and see what he says."

Night found them still waiting, and by then the posse was ready to believe anything. Zack sent Madge home, thought she wanted to linger.

"As soon as we know anything about Johnny, I'll be right home or send him in person," Zack promised, and with that Madge had to be content.

"You did right," Sheriff Holden said to Zack, as she jogged off in the gloom. "I think we've got a fight on our hands. If Slaughter is out all night, we can be sure he was raidin'. No doubt Cuneo has put him wise to some old holdout where they can drive the stolen stuff. Never dare to bring it here."

SO while the lawmen prepared a gun argument for any glib explanation that might roll from Sim Slaughter's tongue, far away in the box canyon Johnny Berdan faced the last night of his captivity. Though he didn't know it until the small hours of morning.

His profane outburst, as soon as Slaughter and Cuneo thrust their heads through the shack door, drew a grin from Sim and the remark:

"Boy, you're a genius at it! Cuss while you can. You've got no more than a week longer on top of the sod if our raidin' luck holds out like these last two nights. Watch him careful, Smoke."

"Sure," said "Smoke" Tupper, the last man who was ever to ride herd on Johnny.

The door slammed. Trudging to weary mounts, Cuneo remarked: "I'm dog-fagged, Sim. Wish we didn't have to go back to Bar Z Bar."

"It's necessary," declared Sim positively, "to keep our hands clean. Reports of these cattle raids'll get around. But what can they prove on us if we're all in camp on Zack's range, come sunup? Big hulk like you croakin' about a little saddle drill!"

As the hoofbeats of the raiders died out of the canyon, and only the plaint of the cattle broke the silence, Johnny Berdan craned his neck above the

homemade table on which he and the other guard had been playing cards. What was occupying Smoke Tupper in that corner? He saw as Tupper straightened, turned. Smoke was holding two quart bottles of whisky, smuggled into the cabin in his saddle pockets.

"You're a real guy!" chuckled Johnny. "Brought us a drink, eh?"

"Not 'us'—me!" Smoke Tupper placed the bottles on the table beside Johnny's bunk, and eased onto the stool with a sigh. "I ain't had a chance to get drunk for days, and the hell with Slaughter's orders! You can't slope this place, kid, and I might's well be drunk as sober." Having no glass, he tipped up one of the bottles, nodding at Johnny. "Here's how!"

"Hope it's poisoned!" snorted the cowboy.

Smoke became highly abusive in his language as he drank, lowering the contents of that bottle more quickly than Johnny had seen the trick done before. Plainly Tupper was a very dry rustler. Johnny watched him with a thoughtful expression, heedless of the names he was called. With the outlaw drunk, now, if ever, must come his chance to fade out of the canyon. But with wrists and ankles tightly bound, how was that end to be achieved?

He thought Smoke would stop when the one quart was gone. His talk had died to a mutter, and he looked ready to slide under the table. But when Smoke drew the cork of the second bottle, after several futile grabs at the neck, Johnny said nothing. It was all right with him if Tupper wanted to kill himself with an overdose.

The cork out, Smoke raised the bottle for a long swallow, put it down with a heavy hand. Then, suddenly, he passed out. As his head dropped on bent arms, the bottle tipped over with a thud. Johnny watched the liquor gurgle from the bottle-neck, over the table-edge and onto his bunk. Suddenly he thrust his bound wrists under the amber stream. When the bottle was empty, Johnny's rawhide strings were limp and stretchable.

Tupper was snoring in a high key. Working his hands loose, the cowboy gave attention to his close-bound ankles. So long had he been tied, that it took a bit of time to start his blood circulating freely. Rising on his knees in the bunk, he picked up an empty bottle. When it landed, Smoke Tupper went over backward, chair and all. Johnny was in no mood for fooling with these killers, and didn't give Smoke a chance to claw for a gun.

From long confinement, his movements were still slower than ordinary as he pushed away the table and tied up the heavily breathing outlaw. He stripped off Smoke's guns and buckled them on; caught up the latter's saddle and blew out the lamp. Outside, in a makeshift corral, he found Tupper's horse. It was a bit jaded, but there was nothing else to ride.

Johnny threw on the leather, moving now with more of his old speed. The cowboy was surprised at the number of cattle taken in two hauls, but he didn't linger. He removed the logs from the canyon entrance, then piled them back in place and hit leather.

WITH the idea of reaching Hondo Forks sometime after sunup and getting Sheriff Holden and a posse, to descend on Slaughter's camp immediately, Johnny spurred through the night. His way led him past the Bar Z Bar south pasture, for he wanted to be sure that Sim had gone there with the gang.

As a matter of fact, riding jaded horses themselves, they weren't much ahead of Johnny in reaching their destination. Daybreak wasn't far off. Johnny, as he approached, could see men pulling saddles from horses inside the fence.

He saw something else, too, which probably had escaped the notice of the rustlers when they rode by the same corner earlier, for it would have been darker then. Three forms were

crouched near the fence, almost hugging the ground. Johnny was about to sheer off, not wishing to be discovered, when these figures turned. Even in the half-light he recognized Sheriff Holden and Zack Eagles as two of them. They knew him, too, and beckoned him eagerly.

Suspecting what was in the wind, the cowboy dismounted and went forward afoot. The sheriff and Zack were holding upper and lower strands of wire wide apart when he arrived, so that he could crawl through. He did so, and they gripped his hands, spoke in guarded tones.

"We're onto this gang, Johnny," said the sheriff. "Waited for 'em to come home, and we're just about to attack. They're surrounded, but don't know it yet. Been lookin' for you for three days. Where in hell—"

A gun cracked in mid-pasture, beside the wagon. Dex Cuneo had caught sight of a posseman and tossed his gun. A shot answered him and Dex pitched down, with a bullet in his brain. The unsaddled horses scattered at a run. As flashes of gun lightning broke out all around the wagon where the rustlers stood, the cattle Slaughter had bought from Zack took fright. They high-tailed up the pasture, leaving the posse and the owl-hooters to scrap it out.

From the southeast corner of the fence pelted the sheriff, Zack, Johnny and another cowboy. But Johnny was in the lead, his guns out. He owed the gang something for their harsh treatment, and at forty yards he started triggering.

The sheriff felt obliged to call on the gang to surrender, in the law's name. But when Slaughter saw Johnny coming, his guns rattling a devil's tattoo, the crooked cowman knew it was fight or hang, and he urged the others to stand their ground. They crouched in a swirl of powdersmoke, split by red flashes. The possemen closed in from all sides, shooting hard, and only a man or two dropped, as outlaw lead nicked them.

"Downed every one of 'em!" exclaimed the sheriff, gliding forward with reloaded guns bent on the sprawled forms. He counted, then counted again. "But say, one of 'em's missin'. When they rode in there was—"

"Stand back!" shouted Johnny, jumping in front of Holden and Eagles. "Slaughter is the missin' hombre—he's in the wagon. I saw him duck, under cover of the smoke!"

The advance on the wagon halted, and as the light grew in the east, Johnny stepped forward alone. His gaze was pinned on the tailboard of the hooded wagon and he called:

"I know where you're hidin', Sim. Come out and face the music!"

Evidently Sim intended to slide out by way of the front, over the wagon seat, for he appeared there suddenly. Zack Eagles shouted warning, but Johnny had caught the faint scuff of boots on the dashboard and whirled as Sim lined his guns to drill Johnny at the other end of the wagon. The cowboy fired as he turned. Sim's lead scraped along the canvas tilt, winged into space. Sim himself pitched from the dash like a man diving, dead when he struck the ground.

Zack Eagles came up and swatted Johnny on the back.

"We'd like to know how you got away from 'em, and all the rest of it, son," he said. "But I reckon that can wait and Madge can't. I promised to send you up to the house, if you got here. It's due to her scoutin' this camp that these rascals were caught. She recognized Cuneo."

"Worried about me, was she?" Johnny grinned widely as he holstered his guns. "Well, somebody lend me a horse—the one I rode's outside the fence. See you at the house and tell you where you can find all the cattle stole the past two nights."

A few minutes later he rode forth with a smile on his lips, a song in his heart, to meet the girl who waited at trail's end.

Longrider Luck

By C. M. Miller

He waited, his six-gun ready to strike.

Ranger Jim Rivers had a mission he didn't like. For the first time in his Colt career he found a badman he didn't want to bring in. And when the trails of these two men crossed, they made a bullet bet on longrider luck.

JIM RIVERS didn't particularly like the looks of the heavy-set man riding down the rocky canyon toward him. Nor did he like the looks of the three rifle-armed men who were hiding in the big boulders upon the right-hand canyon wall.

A few minutes ago Jim had spotted those men as they were riding surreptitiously into the boulders. He had wondered why they were so careful about keeping out of sight. Now, this heavy-set man with the red and black blanket shirt, was coming to meet him when he would be squarely under the sights of those three guns up there!

The situation had all the makings of a fine trap and Jim was really worried about it.

The man came on, riding his saddle easy, like a person who has spent half his life astride a good horse. As he neared, Jim noted his smiling good-humored face. Twin six-guns and scabbarded rifle and the sight brought an uneasy flicker to Jim's dark brown eyes. So that was who it was! Jim began to arrange his plans accordingly.

Jim Rivers was just as well armed as the man on the gray, and rode his line-backed sorrel just as easily. He was a slim-hipped cool looking man of twenty-six, and there was something about his smooth bronze features that caught the glance and held it. Calm confidence was there, and an ability to command and something more. Some said it was just Jim Rivers' look and let it go at that.

The heavy-set stranger came on and swung his gray alongside Jim's sorrel. There was a careful, wary look about him and a twinkle in his blue eyes that should not have been there —not in this man anyway.

"Stranger around here?" he asked casually.

"Just that," Jim said, wondering what all this was leading up to.

"From down around Tucson way?" the stranger asked cautiously.

"That's hittin' it pretty close," Jim admitted, wondering how the man knew who he was.

"Lookin' for a job?"

"No," Jim said bluntly. "I'm looking for Bob Dawson, the bank robber, rustler, train robber and plain hell-raiser. I'm up here to arrest him and put a hangnoose around his blasted neck."

"No-o-o! What's the matter with him now?"

"Dawson? Hell," Jim said caustically, "he thinks he's smart when he's the dumbest holdup man that ever hid out in the Arizona mountains. He's scared to death half the time. Why, all he can pick on is little defenseless banks and flimsy express safes and helpless herds of stock. I come up here to twist his blasted tail and make him holler for help."

"No-o-o!" the heavy-set man said. "Seems like I've heard different about this Dawson gent. Seems I've heard he's a pretty good sport. That he usually warns a bank or train or stockman before he pounces down on 'em. Seems I've heard, too, that he'll bet any bank in Arizona he can rob it and get away with it."

"Poppycock!" Jim said sarcastically.

FOR a minute they rode in silence. And always Jim Rivers' brown eyes were flicking about, missing nothing. That was how he happened to see the other three men on the left side of the rocky cut. Three men on the left and three on the right! Both bunches keeping pace with them. This *was* a trap and it would call for some mighty cool work to get out of it alive.

"No," Jim said. "This talk about Bob Dawson being such a good sport is all cow-wash. Why, inside of thirty days I'll have him locked up tighter than the Tucson jail. And I'll bet money on it."

"Yeah? How much?"

"Five hundred dollars."

The thick man dug in his pockets and jingled a handful of gold eagles. "I'll take that bet," he said, grinning.

"Huh!" Jim grunted sourly, still playing his careful game. "You are a sucker. What's your name, stranger?"

"Bob Dawson."

Jim acted surprised. "No!" he said sharply. "You Bob Dawson?"

The man's eyes still twinkled. "I am. And you're Jim Rivers, the cool-headed Arizona Ranger, mister. I knowed you the minute I laid eyes on you. Want this bet or not?"

"I'll take it," Jim said coolly. "And I knew you the minute I saw you."

"The hell you did!" Dawson was really surprised. "Then why all this hogwash you was saying about me?"

Jim grinned triumphantly at him. "Because I saw your men up there on the wall, and I knew if I started anything I'd be dropped in a minute. I didn't want to be taken prisoner either. So I had to take advantage of your betting disposition and joke a bet out of you so you would let me go and see if I could win it. Now we got a bet up. Five hundred says I get you."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Dawson exploded. "You *are* a cool one. The bet stands, feller. No man has ever said that Bob Dawson went back on his word."

"I know it," Jim admitted. "And I like you for it, Dawson. You're a good sport. Shake, and may the best man win."

Dawson held out a big hand. "This life is just a game, feller, and we've got to get some fun out of it. I'll keep my five hundred in my hip pocket so if you shoot me you can find it easy."

"Fine!" Jim agreed. "And I'll do the same. Now I've got to get along, but I'll be seeing you."

"I hope you do, kid," Dawson grinned, "and it's going to be tough killing you."

It was not a strange bargain these men had made, for each had the reputation of keeping his word once he had given it. Gentlemen they were, each in his own way.

Dawson touched his hat in salute, wheeled his horse. Signaling for his men to follow, he rode off down the canyon. Jim Rivers heaved a gusty sigh of relief, wiped a shaky hand over his bronze face and rode on to Clear Water.

CLEAR WATER was a dusty little town at the edge of a blue spring-fed lake. Sheriff John Boggart had his office there. Jim found the wrinkled sheriff in a creaky old chair at his spur-scarred desk. He sat down, stretched his legs and started in with characteristic abruptness.

"I just met Bob Dawson and I bet him five hundred I'd get him inside of thirty days."

The droopy-eyed sheriff's boots hit the floor with a bang.

"What!" he exploded, and Jim told him all about the meeting in the canyon.

John Boggart wagged his gray head dolefully. "Nobody in the world but Bob Dawson would have ever made you such a proposition. Bob's a good sport, dang his thievin' hide! I've run him all over this country and never got nothin' but tauntin' notes and more robberies out of him. And dang if he don't tell me every time he's goin' to rob a place, too! He's a doggone good sport, that feller and I'd kind of hate to see him caught. You got any ideas?"

Jim stared at a buzzing fly on the ceiling. "Some," he admitted.

Sheriff John Boggart took a cigar from his vest pocket, broke it in two and mauled half of it in nearly toothless gums. "They better be pretty dang good then," he remarked. "The ones I cooked up to get him only got me laughed at. He'll run the legs off ary posse in the country, and he knows everything that goes on. How he finds it all out I don't know, but he does. Besides, his gang looks out for each other and they stick together tighter than blue blazes."

"Very interesting," Jim said thoughtfully, still staring at the fly.

It was three days later that the flashy-dressed, loud-mouthed stranger arrived in Clear Water. He got off the stage and blared to everybody that he wanted to buy the finest ranch in the neighborhood and that he had the cash with him to pay for it. For three more days he rode the hills and valleys in

a hired buggy, looking at cattle and ranges galore.

That night Jim Rivers saw him in the Lakefront bar blaring loudly to everyone.

"Yes, sir, gentlemen, when Thomas Waters says a thing he means it! I've got money, loads of it, and I aim to put this country on the map. I'm going to start the finest ranch you ever seen around here."

Jim grimaced his distaste for the man, then plucked him by the sleeve. There was something about Jim Rivers that silenced, for the moment, even this wordy gent.

"I wouldn't talk like that, if I was you, mister," Jim warned quietly. "We've got a holdup man around here by the name of Bob Dawson and when he hears of money he gets it. Keep that money talk quiet."

"Wha-a-at!" Thomas Waters blared indignantly. "Do you think I'd let a tinhorn robber scare me? I'll do as I damn please, and if he sticks his nose out at me I'll pop it!"

He drew a little nickel-plated revolver from his hip pocket. "See that? I mean business."

Jim grimaced again. "That thing wouldn't break an egg at six feet. But don't say I didn't warn you."

Thomas Waters glared sourly at Jim for a moment, then shrugged his well-tailored shoulders. "No loud-mouthed holdup man is going to scare me!" he boasted. "I've got a date to look at some land right now, and I'm going to keep it!"

He stormed out. As he left a wizened cowpoke remarked: "Imagine him callin' anybody loud-mouthed!"

BUT two hours later a very crestfallen Thomas Waters drove forlornly back into town. He found Jim Rivers still in the Lakefront Saloon. The man looked scared stiff and his voice was scarcely a whisper.

"He—he got me!" he said to Jim. "This Bob Dawson got me. He—he took twenty-five thousand dollars from me and he took my gun!"

Jim tried to smother a grin. "He did! And what did he have to say about it?"

Thomas Waters fumbled in his coat pocket. "He—he gave me this note and said it was for Jim Rivers."

Jim spread the crumpled paper and read:

Ranger:

Ain't it about time you was getting busy and catching me? A week is gone already and I'm getting anxious to collect that five hundred off you. Ship this loud-mouthed buzzard out of the country and tell him for me he's a liar. He didn't have enough money on him to buy a good saddle horse.

BOB DAWSON

"When does the next stage leave?" Thomas Waters managed weakly, as Jim carefully folded the taunting note.

Jim looked at the grinning cowboys ringed about and grinned too. "In about an hour."

"I—I think I'd better pack then," the man said meekly and hurried out.

For the next five days Jim Rivers quietly rode the countryside, stopping at little crossroad bars and lonely grocery stores scattered about.

News of the bet between him and Bob Dawson was common property now, and many other bets on the outcome were being made and offered. But despite Jim's quiet competent appearance and the leggy look of his line-backed sorrel most of the bets favored Bob Dawson.

Sheriff John Boggart chewed his cigars and looked wise, but in confidence he admitted he didn't know a thing and his money was on Bob Dawson.

After his round of the countryside, Jim came back to Clear Water and settled down at the hotel. Two weeks were gone when one morning Jim found a note tucked under his door.

Ranger:

You're the damndest law officer I ever saw. You want to lose that bet or was you just bluffing? I been told Jim Rivers is a sticker and means what he says. You really Jim Rivers or do you just look like him?

BOB DAWSON

Jim chuckled, then went down to Sheriff Boggart's office and showed him the note. The sheriff mauled a cigar half and grunted:

"You got to get up early in the morning to get this Bob Dawson, feller. He's smart and he's the damndest man I ever heard tell of."

Jim smiled his quiet little smile. "You know, sheriff," he said gravely, "I feel like a stinking rattler. I've got to get Dawson and doggoned if I don't hate to do it. I don't want to kill that man."

"Huh," Boggart grunted sourly. "I never heard of a man feelin' sorry for a jackrabbit till after he'd lined his sights on him."

THAT afternoon the owner of a little store and saloon, twenty-five miles south of Clear Water, rode into town and looked Jim up. He was a man who didn't come to town often, and before he had left Jim's hotel room a curious crowd was on the sidewalk outside the building.

The grocer came down, forked his horse, and galloped out of town. When Jim appeared, the inquisitive mob swarmed all over him.

"What's up, feller?" they demanded. "This man comin' to see you got anything to do with Bob Dawson?"

Jim smiled in his grave way. "I haven't talked since I came to town. I'm not starting to talk now," he told them, and went across the street to the restaurant.

That night the betting odds against Jim went up. Those who had bet on him went around the streets with dolefully long faces.

For three more days Jim hung around town. Then he saddled up and rode north. In a thick pine woods he circled the town and headed south. Late that night he put up with the grocer who had been in to see him.

For two more days he lazed around there keeping out of sight. Then, that evening of the second day, the grocer slipped into the back room where Jim was hiding.

"He's comin'!" the man panted, goggle-eyed with fear. "He's comin', and for gosh sakes don't shoot the place up too bad."

Jim felt the rush of hot blood to his face and a tiny tremble come into his hands. There was no quiet coolness in him now. Instead, his heart was hammering in his ears like the throb of drums.

Tiptoeing to the dirty window, he peered carefully out. A rangy man on a bald-faced bay horse was riding up to the front of the store. The rider drew rein, swung down and hitched up crossed gunbelts. Then he came, with long-legged strides, toward the store. He had carefully left his horse, reins looped over the saddle horn, standing handy for a quick getaway.

Jim gave the grocer a hasty shove. "Get out front and take care of him," he ordered hoarsely. "I'll do the rest."

"If you don't get us both killed," the grocer blatted dolefully and went trembling out front.

Drawing his six-shooter, Jim hastily slipped out the back door and around to the front. Crouching there, he waited in tense silence. Lying in wait for a man was not Jim Rivers' way of doing things. But he wanted this long-legged stranger alive—not dead. And the man had the looks of a swift and deadly gunfighter.

Inside, the stranger was saying suspiciously: "What's the matter with you, Pete? You're shakin' like you was goin' to bust your suspenders."

The grocer managed weakly: "It ain't nothing. Just one of my spells."

"Spells, hell," the stranger said gruffly. "You're scared. What's wrong?"

"Honest," the grocer answered fearfully, "they ain't nothin' wrong."

The long-legged stranger was definitely suspicious now. "Anybody in that back room?"

"No! No, they ain't a soul," the grocer replied truthfully.

"Well they's somebody around here that oughtn't to be," the stranger

growled. "And I'm takin' a look. Meantime you sack up that list of things and be quick about it."

JIM heard the hammer of a six-gun click back, then the sound of heavy boots neared the door. Jim tensed until every muscle in his body was quivering. The stranger went on by and Jim relaxed a little.

"Here's your stuff, mister," the grocer stammered.

There was the ring of coin on the bar. A grunt, then the boots came tramping toward the door. Jim's shoulders were suddenly so tight they ached. He crouched, poised on his toes, waiting breathlessly. The boots came on, then stopped just inside the door.

Like a brown-eyed, lithe panther Jim stood there not two feet from the long-legged stranger. Had the man seen something? Jim's tracks in the dooryard dust, or a queer shadow, or—

"Pete," the stranger's gruff voice said, "there's somethin' smelly about this place right now. If you got a hand in it I'll shore see that you pay for it."

Then with one long-legged stride the man came through the door. A single bound and Jim Rivers was on him, clubbing viciously with his six-gun. But the man had the sack of groceries on his shoulder and it deflected the blow. He leaped aside. Jim struck again, hard. And missed.

And all in one swift move the long-legged man dropped his groceries and swung up his six-shooter. He shot. Heat blasted Jim Rivers' cheek and the bullet ripped through his hat brim.

Risking everything in one swift hard punch, Jim dropped his gun and lashed out with a vicious right fist. The blow carried a hundred and sixty pounds of desperate strength behind it.

It struck. Squarely on the long-legged man's jaw. He went down, smashing his sack of groceries flat.

Jim laughed a little shakily, wiped his jarred fist on his shirt and got his gun. The grocer crept fearfully to the door and peered out.

"You—you got him?" he whispered huskily.

Jim laughed again. "I did. Get me a bucket of water."

When the grocer came back with the water, Jim had handcuffs on the long-legged stranger, and the man's gun stuck in his own belt. Taking a long drink from the bucket, Jim threw the rest of the water on the still unconscious man. He came to, sputtering and cursing, and wanting to fight. But when he saw the cuffs he quieted down.

There was a hard glint in his cool gray eyes as they traveled slowly over Jim. "I thought there was something around here. What's the next move in your game, mister?"

"We're going to town," Jim said bluntly. "Get in your saddle. We'll talk while we ride. You can keep that sack of grub there, grocer."

The long-legged man climbed to his feet. "It won't ever do *him* no good," he said grimly and climbed obediently into his saddle.

Jim got his own already saddled horse and they rode off, leaving a shaky-kneed grocer standing in his doorway.

"You got that five hundred in your hip pocket, ranger?" the stranger asked.

THEY were riding over bare brown hills now. The long-legged man did not seem worried, but Jim Rivers was. His brown eyes were constantly sweeping the country and his hand was never very far from his gun. No one ever knew what Bob Dawson was going to do next.

"I have," Jim said. "And you can call me Jim."

The man laughed. "It ain't hard from the looks of me to guess what I'm called. It's just plain Slim. Bob Dawson has his five hundred handy too. Jim, he's goin' to collect off you. I know."

Jim's eyes darted to Slim's gaunt face. "How do you know?"

Slim looked mysterious. "You don't

know Bob Dawson. How did you get next to me?"

"Easy. You bought groceries the other day with marked money."

Slim's bony jaw gaped. "Marked money!" he breathed. Then his teeth met with a click. "So that loud-mouthed stranger was a friend of yours and he was carrying marked money, eh?"

Jim smiled gravely. "Thomas Waters is a pretty fair actor. Yes, he had marked money. You see nobody knew exactly how to get hold of some of Dawson's men. I figured he had to buy *some* groceries. He didn't steal 'em all, so I had to get some marked money in his hands. I did. You know the rest."

There was new respect in Slim's gray eyes. "Jim, I heard tell you were full of tricks for a good lookin' feller like you, and by gosh, that was smart! Know any more of 'em?"

Jim gazed at a distant hill. "A few," he said offhand.

"So does Bob Dawson, feller, and you better keep your eyes open. That bet has only got ten days more to go and you ain't even laid eyes on him since that day in the canyon."

"Slim," Jim said gravely, "if I wasn't a ranger I wouldn't want to lay eyes on Bob Dawson. He's the squarest, most honest damned crook I ever heard of, and I can't help liking him."

"That's just about what Bob says about you, feller," Slim answered slowly. "He don't want to kill you, but he's goin' to have to."

"That remains to be seen," Jim answered softly.

"It sure does," Slim agreed.

They rode on into town and Jim locked Slim in the Clear Water jail, then took Sheriff John Boggart into the office. Closing the door carefully, Jim said:

"Sheriff, I want you to call a jury together and try Slim just as quick as you can."

"But the judge ain't here," Boggart protested around the half of a cigar he had just started chewing. "And he won't be here for a week."

Jim frowned. "That's too long. Get him right now. We've got to work fast if I'm going to win that bet."

"Hell," Boggart blurted, "you just as good as lost that right now. Bob Dawson is goin' to have the laugh on you like he has me. But I'll see what can be done about the judge."

IT was five days before they found the judge and three more before he rode pompously into Clear Water. That night Jim went down to the Lakefront Saloon. The place was crowded, for now the whole countryside was up in arms over the Jim Rivers-Bob Dawson affair.

As Jim threaded through the crowd and up to the bar, he did not fail to notice the hostile glances that came his way. At least twenty-five percent of these men were mad about something.

Jim started to speak. But before he could utter a word a thick-necked, red-faced rancher came shoving through the crowd. Shaking a big fist at Jim, he roared:

"I bet a thousand dollars that you would get Bob Dawson and now you're layin' down on the job! When you going to do something?"

Jim went livid. So that was the trouble! "I'm handling this affair," he said evenly. "That's why I came in here. Besides, no one asked you to bet your money. Men," he said, raising his voice, "we are going to try Slim tomorrow morning. He admits he is guilty, so the judge will sentence him to be hanged not later than the evening of day after tomorrow."

With that, he walked stiffly down the solemn lane they made for him to the door, and went back to Sheriff Boggart's dusty office. Boggart came in behind him, spit out a chew of cigar tobacco, and remarked gravely:

"Jim, that betting business has got the town all stirred up and it's apt to start something that will backfire and blow your little scheme all to hell. The

town is full of men right now and more of 'em is ridin' in every minute."

Jim buried his drawn face in his hands. "I know it," he admitted. "I saw a case of it in the saloon when I was giving out the fake news about Slim. But if I tell the people any more, Dawson will hear of it and I won't catch him. And I've got to get him. But, damn it, I don't *want* to catch him."

John Boggart wagged his gray head dolefully. "I don't blame you, feller," he said, dropping a friendly hand on Jim's shoulder. "And I'm thinkin' you won't."

Jim stood up. There was grimness in him now that he had shaken off that depressed feeling. Grimness and hardness and a great flood of new confidence. "But I *will* get him," he said firmly and went out.

The next morning the pompous judge did as he had been told. He promptly sentenced Slim to hang by the neck until he was dead, so help him God. And Boggart locked him up and began preparations to carry out the sentence at six o'clock in the evening of the next day.

Jim had no intention of hanging Slim, but the time set for it left him just twenty-four hours to catch Bob Dawson. The thought of it made Jim feel cold all over. For a month now, despite his appearance of doing nothing, he had been all keyed up. The nerve strain was telling on him. Bob Dawson had been active, too. A bank had lost its money to him; a train had been held up, and a fair-sized herd run off.

At eight o'clock that night Clear Water's streets were teeming with men. Some were angry. But the ones who had bet on Bob Dawson were already mentally spending their money.

Jim stood in the sheriff's office, glumly staring out the window. Boggart was placidly chewing and trying to count the spots on the fly-splotched ceiling.

"Sheriff," Jim suggested, "can't you get these men out of town? Close up the saloons or something. That's it! Make the saloons lock up."

Boggart spat, wiped off his bony chin and grunted. "You think of the damnedest things," he complained. "What's the idea?"

"You know just as well as I do what the idea is," Jim snapped testily. And if you don't lock those saloons up I will!"

"Oh, all right," Boggart complained. "I'll see what I can do."

HE went out and Jim crossed the street to a restaurant after his seventh cup of coffee since six o'clock. This time he brought a gallon back to the sheriff's office with him.

By eight-thirty the saloons were all locked up and grumbling men were saddling up and riding home. Here and there little groups remained on the street, but by ten they were gone.

Jim heaved a deep sigh of relief and tried a stiff-lipped grin. This waiting was worse than working. He had the jitters bad. If he could only be doing something he'd get over this nervousness.

He fell to pacing the floor of the now dark office. Boggart spat and growled: "Hell, Jim, they ain't hangin' *you*. It's Slim we're settin' up with."

Jim subsided, took another swig of cold coffee from the tin bucket and sat down, but in ten minutes he was at it again.

Once he asked: "Sheriff, are you sure Bob Dawson has heard about Slim's sentence yet?"

"Sure," Boggart said positively. "He knew all about that within three hours after you announced it in the saloon. That feller has got the dangdest way of learning things."

"Well," Jim managed, "if he didn't hear of it we're sunk."

It was five minutes to three and Jim was standing at the window, when the lone rider came down the street and rode on by the office out of sight back of the livery barn. A minute later a horse whinnied somewhere off in the

dark. Jim Rivers' jitteriness left him instantly. The waiting was over and again he was the cool-headed, slim-hipped ranger. Boggart squirmed in his creaky chair.

"What did I tell you?" Boggart whispered triumphantly. "Dawson knows what's goin' on. But, whatever-from-hell made you guess he would try to rescue one of his men if he got caught?"

Jim explained coolly. "The day I rode into Clear Water you said Dawson and his men stick together tighter than blue blazes. So what else was there to think? Here they come!" And, involuntarily, his hand went to his hip pocket, making sure that five hundred dollars was still there.

Boggart tiptoed hurriedly to Jim's side and peeked out the window. A group of shadowy riders had come around the corner of the livery barn and were warily moving toward the jail. In the lead Jim recognized Bob Dawson's squat figure and could guess just how the man's dancing eyes must be flickering about the empty street. They came on, riding softly and slowly.

Sheriff Boggart cocked his six-shooter. And in that silent room the click sounded like a clap of thunder. Jim clamped a hard hand on the sheriff's thin wrist.

"Don't shoot now," he said huskily. "Bob Dawson had the drop on me and didn't kill me. I'm going to give him his chance. It's the only fair way. Wait till after I've opened up."

The men were in front of the jail now, swinging out of their creaky saddles, talking in hushed whispers. Jim tiptoed to the front door, his two holsters rubbing loudly against his thighs. He paused there, one hand on the knob, and waited for Boggart to cross the room to his side.

On the other side of the door a spur rowel tinkled as a man came up the three steps to the office. That man probably had a crowbar to use on the door.

"Seven to two is pretty long odds, boys," Boggart whispered huskily. "But play her through."

Jim gusted a deep breath. "Okay!" he said and whipped the door wide open. "Put 'em up, Dawson," he barked. "We were waiting for you."

FOR a breathless instant the world stood perfectly still. One man, a crowbar in his hand, was crouching on the top step as if he had been listening at the door. Dawson, a gun in his hand, his jaw hanging loose, had one foot on the bottom step. The other five men were bunched on the sidewalk, their horses directly back of them.

"So you figgered it out," Dawson managed gruffly, choking his surprise. "Well, I hate to do this, but I'm collectin' that bet in your hip pocket."

As if that was a signal every man there went for his gun. The man squatting on the step swung his crowbar at Jim's legs. Jim shot him directly through the top of the head and knocked him sprawling down the steps.

Guns winked and roared in that dark street. Jim was half crouched, a gun in either hand and shooting with the speed of flickering lightning. Boggart was framed in the door with him, triggering as rapidly as he knew how.

At the first hot lash of lead two more of Dawson's men crumpled to the sidewalk. Jim felt fire burn along his right thigh. A bullet struck his crossed gunbelts. It felt like a blow from a sledge hammer, but the looped cartridges had stopped it short of flesh.

Dawson backed up, still shooting. A horse squealed and plunged as a bullet burned along its side. Boggart grunted and grabbed at the door to hold himself up just as his hammer fell on a dead shell. An empty gun!

Jim Rivers was cold in that deadly instant. Cold all over. Five of Dawson's six men were crumpled on the sidewalk now. But by a miracle Jim and

Dawson were both on their feet. Boggart was sliding to the floor.

Dawson shouted one hoarse word. "Git!" he said and leaped behind his horse. His one remaining man sprang for his saddle. Jim dropped him as he swung up and the man went down under his plunging horse's belly.

The ranger swung both his guns on Dawson then. But the stocky man was using his head. Instead of straddling his saddle, he had one foot in the stirrup and one hand on the horn. The horse was between him and Jim Rivers and running as if the devil were after it.

Jim sent his last two shots at the fleeing man and missed. Then Dawson was in his saddle and disappearing swiftly down the street. Jim bounded down the steps to catch the bandit horse. A dropped six-gun turned under his foot and he went sprawling. By the time he scrambled to his feet, the frightened horses had fled and Dawson was gone.

Boggart was already up and fumbling around in the office for the lamp. He found it and got it going just as Jim came in. There was blood all over the sheriff's left leg and more of it on his right forearm. But—

" 'Tain't as bad as it looks," he said, biting a cigar in two. "Neither bullet touched bone." His shrewd gray eyes probed Jim hard. "You look kind of relieved now that it's over with. Did Dawson's gettin' away have anything to do with it?"

Jim smiled a little oddly. "Maybe that is it," he admitted. "I won't get him now, but doggone if I know how I'm ever going to pay him that five hundred."

"Use a trick—you got lots of em," Boggart chuckled. Then he added soberly: "Dawson's done for anyway. His gang is wiped out. He won't make any more trouble even if he did win his bet."

But next morning Jim found a note and a small package at his hotel room door. The note read:

Ranger:

I'm leaving for Californy and I'm going straight. Bob Dawson will keep his word. And here's the five hundred I owe you. I know you didn't lock me up but, feller, you done worse when you wiped the bunch out so I figger you win.

Adios, from One Good Sport to Another.

In the January Issue

WESTERN TRAILS

MAVERICK LAW

Great Action Novel — **By Andor de Soos**

HALF-PINT COLTMAN

By Joe Archibald

On Sale November 25th

Pay-Dirt Gamble

By Wayne D. Overholser

Jess Cattlee had a pay-dirt mission down in Kerby Canyon. But Jess expected to make a dinero delivery—not a pistol payment.

A STRANGE uneasiness settled over young Jess Cattlee, the instant he left Big Bend with the gold. Still, five thousand dollars in his saddle bags was enough to give him the jitters.

"I'll expect you back tomorrow night," his dad, Sheriff Bill Cattlee, had said. "Tell Ben to scrape some of the wool off his back and ride in to town. And don't go to playing games with my old pal, Black Murtree. They say he headed north after holding up the Elk Tooth bank."

Now it was late afternoon with the sunlight slanting through the pines, throwing a strange shadow of needled network ahead of him. It was cool. The

rain that morning had left the sweet smell of damp moss and needles strong in the air.

But all that was passed unnoticed by young Jess. The feeling of uneasiness had deepened. He felt his bone-handled gun heavy on his hip, swung low and tied down as his father had taught him. The knowledge that he was fast and sure with it didn't bring him courage as it had done in the past. Maybe he was yellow. Maybe he wasn't made of the same stuff his hard-bitten gun-slinging dad was.

Jess swore under his breath, and tried to think of Ben Kerby. He remembered seeing Ben when he'd been just a button. He'd ridden up here once with his dad when he'd been barely big enough to stick on a bronc's back.

The trail was dropping now into Kerby Canyon. He could see Ben's cabin nestled in a grove of aspens, a thin curl of smoke twisting into the still air. The sheep were grazing beyond, scattered through the pines.

Dusk had settled down like a blanket. The air had turned cold. Better get a move on, he decided, and touched the flanks of his roan with the sharp rowels of his Mexican spurs. His mount broke into a canter.

The trail flattened out into the canyon floor. He rode up to the cabin and dismounted. Trailing the reins, he knocked on the door. Funny Ben wasn't anywhere in sight. Maybe he hadn't heard him ride up. Then a stirring inside, the sound of a man's booted heels.

"That you, Jess?" a voice called.

"Yeah," young Cattlee answered.

A light sprang up inside. The door opened, and a man stood silhouetted against the red glow of a kerosene lamp. He was tall and square, his face covered by a black beard. Two guns hung low on his thighs. They were almost lost against the blackness of his pants.

"Put your bronc, up Jess, and come on in. I'm cooking up a mess of cackleberries."

Jess turned and led his roan into the log barn that squatted back of the cabin. He fed his bronc, and jerked off the saddle. Seemed like Ben was smaller with a lot of gray in his beard. Jess picked up the saddle bags, heavy with the gold. The coins clinked musically as he lifted them. Suppose the hombre inside wasn't Ben?

He looked around. Another horse stood in the stall next to his roan, a big, long-legged black. Flecks of lather showed gray against the glossy skin. He must have been ridden long and hard.

FEAR gnawed deeper. Ben wouldn't ride a bronc that way. He'd have no need to. Jess drew his gun, saw that the trigger action was right, that the cylinder was stuffed wih fresh loads. He looked around for a place to hide the gold. He wished he'd dropped it along the trail. Then he saw a box of oats in the corner. He lifted the lid, scooped a hole in the grain and buried the saddle bags.

He went into the house. The bearded gent looked up from the stove.

"Have a good ride in, Jess?" he asked.

"Pretty long," young Cattlee said, and watched the man turn the eggs.

Funny Ben would have eggs. If he remembered right, Ben didn't eat anything but mutton and the vegetables he raised in his garden. He stared at the man's broad back, and shoved his gun a little farther front.

"Yeah, it is a long ride." The man took the eggs out of the pan, put them in a plate and set them on the table. "Too damned far. Wished I lived closer to town." He poured coffee into two battered tin cups.

Now Jess knew this wasn't Ben Kerby. Ben was always glad he did live a long way from town.

"Sit down, younker," the bearded gent shoved up a rawhide bottom chair, and pulled one up for himself. "Reckon you're plumb hungry."

Jess sat down. He was hungry, but

the food stuck in his throat. He watched the man eat. Once he caught the eyes—hard, black eyes that looked as if they'd explode over the sights of a Colt.

"Funny thing," the man was saying, "you look a hell of a lot like your dad when we used to ride herd in Texas."

"I don't think that's funny," Jess said, and stuffed a forkful of bacon into his mouth.

"Funny 'bout us, I mean. Used to be three of us, you know." He gulped his coffee, and wiped his mouth off on the back of a hairy hand. "Yep, used to be three of us thicker'n molasses in January. Now look at us. Me, I'm herding sheep, Jack's Black Murtree, and your dad—well, he's a lawman."

The man spat the last word out as if it tasted bad, hate suddenly burning in his black eyes. They narrowed to pin points, fury-laden. Cold fear chilled Jess' heart as the truth exploded in his brain. The man across the table was Black Murtree the killer.

Jess tried to swallow another mouthful of bacon. He mustn't show fear. Murtree mustn't know he suspected this wasn't the real Ben Kerby.

"Bring the money?" Murtree asked. He looked across the table again.

"No—" Jess kept his voice firm—"Dad couldn't raise it now. He thought maybe you'd wait until fall. We got a nice bunch of steers to go off then."

Murtree set down his tin cup.

"You're lying, Jess," he snarled. "Reckon maybe you hid that dinero and figure on coming back for it."

A DOZEN plans raced through Jess' head. He knew he was no match for Murtree in a straight out draw. If he could get the killer's attention for a second, give him a chance to go for his own gun. He thought of heaving the table into Murtree's lap, of trying to douse the kerosene lamp that flickered in the center of the table.

But none of his ideas would work. Meanwhile, he had to keep Murtree thinking he didn't know.

"You got me wrong, Ben," he said. "I wouldn't double-cross you."

The feeling of uneasiness that had haunted him all day was gone. He was staring death square in the face now, but it wasn't as if he were still facing the unknown. He wondered how his dad would meet this situation.

Suddenly the killer drew his six-gun and laid it on the table beside his plate. He looked at it, meaningly.

"You're gonna give me that dinero, young feller, or I'll blast your hide just plumb full of holes."

"Kinda on the prod, ain't you, Ben?" Jess asked softly.

"Maybe so, but I want that gold."

Jess brought his legs back against his chair. He felt the rowels of his spurs dig into the floor. An idea burned through his brain. Better go down trying. It would be only a matter of seconds now until Murtree would show his hand.

"You're right, Ben," he said, scooting down in his chair. "I got the money. I was just kinda stringing you along."

He tensed himself. This was the moment. One leg shot out with the speed of a springing cougar. He twisted his foot and brought the sharp rowels slashing across the killer's leg. Murtree howled in pain, his hands flying down, his chair crashing to the floor.

Jess had kicked back his own chair, and was on his feet, his Colt in his hand. He saw Murtree grab for his gun, but his own .45 was spitting jagged flame and leaden death. The outlaw took the first bullet in the shoulder. Jess felt a slug burn along his ribs. Acrid smoke bit into his nostrils. The cabin rocked with the crashes of gunfire.

Murtree was on the floor, rolling. Jess fired again, saw his bullet had missed, but the outlaw was moving too fast for accurate shooting. Jess heard the snarl of another slug pass his ear, distinctly heard it thud into a log above his head. Then he slammed an-

other shot. Murtree gurgled. Blood poured down his shirt in a pumping, crimson stream. His Colt dropped from nerveless fingers. He tried to speak, but no words came—only another liquid gurgle. Then he lay still. Jess' last bullet had cut through his throat.

Young Cattlee sat down, trembling. Then he got up and bathed his wound. He heard the drum of a horse's hoofs. Somebody was coming. He whirled, his Colt covering the door. It was flung open. A gray-bearded man stood there, astonishment written across his face as he saw the stiffening form of Black Murtree on the floor.

"Ben," Jess shouted, "I'm sure glad to see you."

"Well, I'll be—" the sheepman stopped. "It's Black Murtree. What the hell's been going on?"

"He was posing as you, Ben, and I hadn't seen you for so long, I wasn't sure at first. Then I found out, and we had a little ruckus. How'd he know I was coming with the money?"

The sheepman scratched his head.

"I s'pose he found the note I left for you in case you got in 'fore I did. I said not to worry 'bout the money, and I'd be back from Injun Post 'fore night, but I didn't make it soon as I figured. He knew I lived here, musta figured on me giving him a hideout, the murdering snake."

Jess sat down weakly.

"Your money's in the barn, Ben. I was sure thinking, awhile back, you'd never see it again."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Western Aces, published Bi-monthly at Springfield, Mass.
for October 1, 1938.

State of New York
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared A. A. Wyn, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of the Western Aces, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Magazine Publishers, Inc., 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y., C. & A. Publishing Co., Mount Morris, Illinois, E. L. Angel, Rockville Center, N. Y., and E. Campbell, Mount Morris, Illinois.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is
(This information is required from daily publications only.)

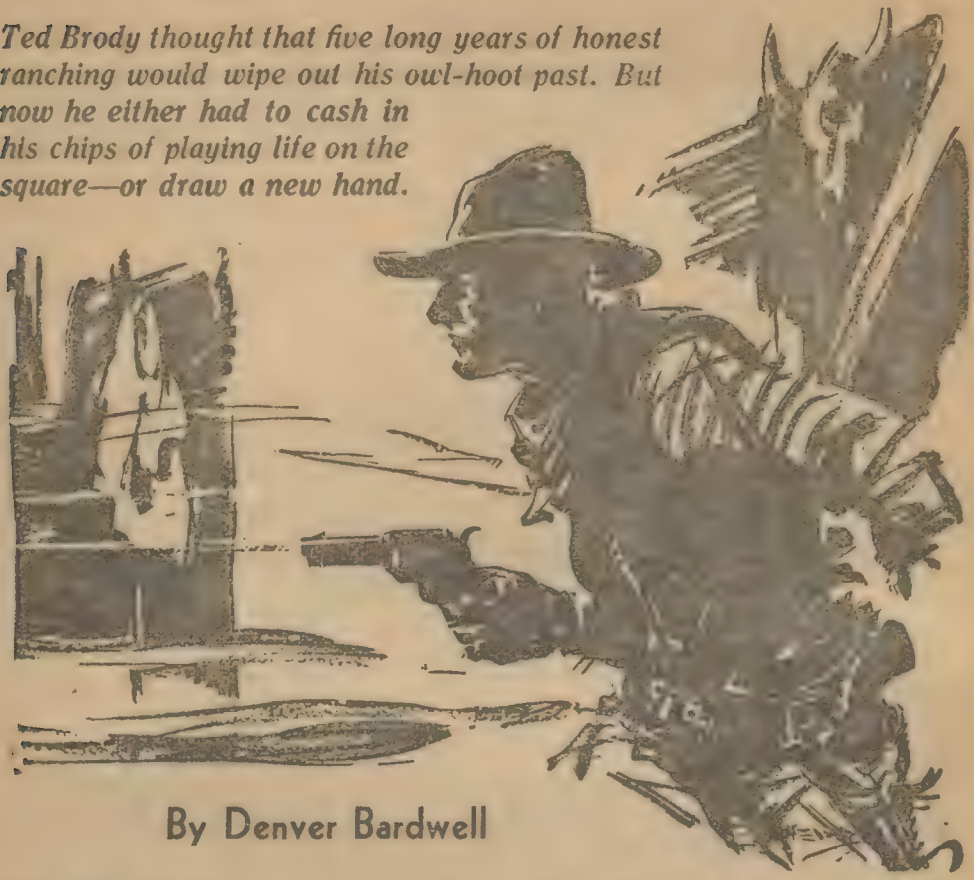
Magazine Publishers, Inc., Publisher
A. A. Wyn, Publisher

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 23rd day of September, 1938.

J. A. HUGHES, Notary Public
Queens Co. Clerk's No. 3297, Register's No. 7862
Certificates filed in New York's Co. Clerk's No. 1067
Register's No. 9H663.
Commission expires 3/30/39

A Gun-Swift's Payoff

Ted Brody thought that five long years of honest ranching would wipe out his owl-hoot past. But now he either had to cash in his chips of playing life on the square—or draw a new hand.



By Denver Bardwell

TED BRODY was on the way to blast the bridge to his happiness. For five years he had worked here as he had never worked before in his twenty-seven years. His hands were tanned, rope-burned and calloused.

He looked at those hands as he rode along. A wry smile twisted his thin lips. "Clean!" How could he ever have thought they would become clean with a few years of honest work? Clean enough to clasp the soft, warm hand of Ann Harrington at their wedding next Sunday? His past had caught up with him. Lucky for Ann that it had caught up with him this morning instead of next week.

Buck Shinn and Hardrock Kellin had laughed and joked about it back there in his little ranch house when he insisted on taking time to go to the Bar-H and call off his marriage. But the two ex-convicts, turned to the killer trail again, did not understand. He knew they were quite incapable of seeing how he felt. He let them go on thinking that he just didn't give a damn, that he was cynical enough to laugh at the whole thing. They held him too completely at their mercy—and they were merciless.

At the bend in the little valley on the road to the Harrington ranch headquarters he saw a Bar-H cow floundering helplessly in the cattail

bog. The Bar-H that belonged to Jeb Harrington, Ann's father, would some day be Ann's inheritance. Ted unloosed his lariat and spent twenty minutes pulling old Jeb's cow to safety. It was hard work, but he welcomed it, because that delayed the agonizing task of facing Ann Harrington for the last time.

When he was folding his muddied lariat again on his saddle, watching the shaken cow wobble off across the prairie, two Bar-H cowboys rode down to him. They knew him well and saw what he had just done.

Tim Orcutt laughed and said: "Savin' your daddy-in-law's cows is like savin' your own, durn near, ain't it, Ted?"

"Yeah, the lucky wolf," Ben Sucher added, grinning. "Musta been headin' over to the big house, warn't you, Ted, when you seen the bogged cow? 'Twon't do you no good, though. She ain't there."

"What! What do you mean, Ben? What's happened?" Ted paled a little in spite of his tan.

Both cowboys laughed heartily, enjoying his dark look of disappointment.

"Snub the horse laugh, fellers," Ted begged. "Isn't Ann at home?"

Ben Sucher saw the dark glint in Ted's blue eyes and must have reminded himself that this anxious man might soon be bossing the Bar-H string of riders. He wiped the grin off his face and became serious.

"The old' gov'ner drove her in to Grand Crossin' yestiddy, Ted," he informed. "Seems she couldn't git the right sorta weddin' dress in our little cowtown county seat. They'll be back Sat-day."

Both cowboys looked with swelling surprise at the change in Ted Brody. Tim Orcutt started to ask Ted something. The latter saw the question coming and ran from it. He whirled his cowpony and spurred him fiercely toward his own little ranch home. The two Bar-H prodders sat in their saddles gaping, speechless until Ted Brody disappeared around a bend of the creek timber.

A HALF-HOUR later Ted swung off his sweating, winded mount in front of his house. Slim Anglin and Barfoot Oakie, his two riders, were away at work on the north fence line, had already gone early that morning before the two ex-convicts rode in. Ted was glad of that. He would have to explain to no one about his going. His disappearance on the eve of his wedding would be a ten-day sensation.

Ann would worry, of course. Perhaps she would cry her pretty eyes red for a while, maybe hate him, not being sure if he had jilted her instead of suffering some bad accident over in the badlands. He sometimes went there to catch ownerless wild mavericks for adding to his growing herd. When searchers failed to find him in the badlands, she would be sure he had jilted her.

But he would never come back. He could not marry her as long as these men lived to blackmail and force him to do their bidding. He knew that some day he would have to kill those two men.

That wouldn't hurt his conscience. He swore to himself that it wouldn't, not with them blasting his life this way. But even though they richly deserved it, he couldn't just kill two men in order to marry Ann Harrington. He must travel far, begin over again, sure at last that the two men who could lift the scarecrow of his earlier years were forever silenced. One thing he was sure about now. Those two men waiting in his house would never force him to go to Grand Crossing for that bank job, not while Ann and her father were there.

"Well, kid, d'ju put off your weddin' day?"

Ted stood just within the doorway of his house and glared at the two men. Buck Shinn straightened up, losing his grin. Hardrock Kellin

jumped up from Ted's couch, where he had been lazily stretched. Hardrock had earned his name well in other days. Ted Brody knew he was the more ruthless of these two bad ones, although Shinn had never sprouted wings.

"I told you, Buck, we shouldn't 'a' let the young skunk outa our sight!" Hardrock blurted, looking suspiciously at the hatred flaming in Brody's face.

"Don't git scared so easy, Hardrock," Shinn advised, cooling down. He was the brainier of the two, even if Hardrock's guns were the more deadly. "What've we got to scare at? We done our time and he's still got to do his if he kicks over the traces. What stirred the hornets' nest under you, kid?"

There was a hard glitter in his dark brown eyes as he studied the grim-faced younger man. Hardrock Kellin's right hand dawdled suggestively near the gun butt dragging on his hip. The prison pallor of his forehead, that a few weeks in the sun had not wholly erased, was accentuated by his bushy black eyebrows. They were long enough to plait. Just now, as he frowned, they ran together over his nose like fuzzy bear cubs in a tussle.

"She's gone to Grand Crossing with her father to buy her wedding dress," Ted Brody gritted out at last. "I'll not go to Grand Crossing while she's there—not for what you fellers want!"

"Why not?" Kellin demanded, bristling. "What you'll do in the dark o' night won't never hurt her none. 'Sides that, who's runnin' this, you or us? We got the job set for tonight and tonight it'll be. Git a hustle on you!"

TED BRODY bit his lips. He didn't want a showdown with the two here. He wore his gun, and he was as good with it as either of the men before him. But while he was sure of one in any contest, the other would get him. When he started it, he must rid the world of both.

"It's the craziest thing I ever heard of," he told them, "you two picking on Grand Crossing for your first dirty job after shucking the pen. People there will know you—maybe recognize me. Even if you have fixed it so that the sheriff and his deputies will all be away tonight, somebody'll spot us. I haven't been back over there since—"

He hesitated and swallowed, biting at his drawn lip.

"Yeah," Hardrock Kellin snorted with more venom than he had displayed before. "Not since you run out on us after you tapped that ol' rancher's tin safe for the kale while we got caught and sent up for it. You coulda helped us slip the locks o' that Grand Crossin' two-bit jail, but you jest hung round and done nothin' till we got the stretch."

"For the last time I'm telling you two," Brody grated, "that I didn't take the money with me when I jumped out that window and got away. You know I didn't want to do that job any more than I want to do this one. You forced me to it. I'd sworn I wouldn't do another safe job for you after that one in Cheyenne. You promised not to ask it of me, then broke your promise.

"I figured you never aimed to let up on me after getting me spotted to the law for that Cheyenne burst, so why shouldn't I take the only chance of making you keep your promise? I've quit card slicking and safe opening for these last five years. Toughened my hands with hard work a-purpose so I couldn't do what I used to do. I'll never be able to open that bank safe in Grand Crossing."

"A long and pretty speech, kid," Buck Shinn rasped sarcastically. "But it's your bad luck if you cain't shell open that safe tonight. Maybe it'd be right good for you to dry out in the pen for a few years like we done. We need this stake for a starter. There

must be several thousand easy takin's in that safe."

Ted Brody clenched his hands as hope struck through him. He had three thousand dollars in bank notes cached in a hiding place in his kitchen. In a way it was a wedding present for Ann from him, for it would fix up their home just as she saw fit to spend it.

If they wanted a stake— But no, they would just take his money and laugh at him, still drive him on to the crime they had set out for his once nimble hands. He must take that cache of money with him and fool them with it, tell them he got it from the bank safe. But he wouldn't tap that safe!

"All right," he agreed, simulating reluctance. "I guess you chucked up a-plenty while I was gone. Let me snatch a bite and I'll be ready to ride."

He went into the kitchen. Kellin winked at Shinn and said low: "I cain't hardly wait to see the plumb painful surprise that young devil'll have when we—"

"Shut up!" Shinn warned, making a quick motion at his partner. "He's got sharp ears!"

BEFORE he had ridden five miles on the long journey to Grand Crossing, he knew that he was practically a prisoner in the power of his two ruthless companions. They let him retain his .45, all right, but he could not figure out why. Buck Shinn rode beside him, Hardrock following along closely behind them. Ted never felt a moment of complete freedom from their sly surveillance. But why had they left him his gun?

It was nearly forty miles to Grand Crossing. Ted thought they could not possibly make it short of nine or ten o'clock that night, even with no halts for resting their bronco.

But when Shinn saw the sun sliding down midway the western sky, he pushed their gait to a steady lope on the long downward trail into the river valley. They loped for three hours. The toughened range ponies began to show distress. The town of Grand Crossing was in plain sight when the sun danced on the rim of blue-black mountains far over in the west.

"No use killing our ponies," Ted suggested to Shinn. "We can walk 'em from here and still get there soon after dark." He was on edge for darkness to come before hitting the town. That would lessen the chances of Ann and her father seeing him.

"I can guess what's on your mind, kid," Shinn replied. "Thinking the gal might see you in bad company, huh? Shuck that idear and keep a-lopin', 'cause we won't hit the town till just 'bout dark."

Ted wondered what would happen after he gave them his money, how long before another and still other crimes would be mapped out for him? If they meant to force him on to other jobs, he was determined to bring the gun-swift payoff.

If he could only win against the heavy odds their two fast gun hands stacked against him and live through it! Then that Cheyenne job into which they had forced him would no longer hang over his head with its constant nightmarish threat. The old night guard who had seen him, the only witness who could identify and send him to prison, would be very old now, with memory dimmed. Cheyenne was hundreds of miles away. And as that job had been foiled before completion, the law might have forgotten as easily as the old ex-sheriff night guard.

Ted Brody began to hope again as the battle fever rose within him. His first shocking despair of earlier that day, when this catastrophe to his dreams blasted at him, trailed away with the setting sun. He thought of Ann Harrington and the plans for their future on his prospering little spread. Recast again dreams of the day when Ann's inheritance of the

Bar-H joined their grasslands together, to make one of the finest cattle domains in a hundred miles of cow country.

Clean hands! He *had* cleaned his hands by five years of hard work as a useful, respected citizen. Why had he thought that the killing of two sidewinders like Buck Shinn and Hardrock Kellin would soil his hands again? They had no sooner left the shadows of prison behind them when they started again to drag him down once more with them.

In his rage his right hand trembled above the gun that flapped rhythmically on his leg with the loping beat of his tired pony. To fight the blind impulse, he lifted his itchy hand and tussled with his shirt collar that was suddenly tight and uncomfortable.

They rode the main street of Grand Crossing just when the lights in the hotel lobby and the business houses were coming on. Square-glassed post lamps were glowing dully in the evening dusk at a few of the main street corners. Citizens strolled, or walked with more rapid purpose on the board sidewalks. None could have recognized the three riders who walked their tired mounts along the dusty street to the big livery stable and feed store down near the river end of town.

GRAND CROSSING was a busy trade center for a wide stretch of ranching country. Its permanent population grossed three thousand, while ranchers and their families on shopping trips generally filled the Oasis Hotel. Cowboys and transient gamblers patronized the dozen saloons and game tables. Blanket Indians from the reservation over west leaned against store fronts or hunkered in their blankets along dark alleys. They were waiting for the clandestine dealers in pints and quarts of diluted firewater from whom the Indian agent sought in vain to protect them.

Ted Brody gazed into the lobby and dining room of the Oasis as they rode past, fearful that he would see Ann and her father.

They left their jaded horses in the care of the livery stable's night hostler and sauntered back up the darkened street. The familiar layout of the town had not changed in five years. Ted Brody had played his last exciting games of poker in there in Shamus Halleran's Cowboy's Delight at the corner of the courthouse square.

That game had started in the evening of the Friday Buck Shinn and Hardrock received their judicial allotment of five years at hard labor. It had ended on Monday evening with twelve thousand dollars' worth of chips and credit slips in Ted's kitty, the price of his ticket to a new life.

Ted had played that last game on the square, pitting only his luck and poker judgment against a score of the slickest players of those days. He had gone on from that to play the longer, harder game of life on the square. And tonight he would cash in the chips of those five years or draw a new hand.

At the northwest corner of the courthouse square, Buck Shinn murmured from the corner of his mouth that he would take a look around. He wanted to make sure of the absence from town of the sheriff and his two deputies.

"Take the kid on back of the bank, Hardrock," he directed. "I'll meet you there in a few minutes." They still thought of him as the "kid" whom they had easily overawed when he was nothing but an easy-going younker.

Hardrock took no chance. He walked a little behind Ted over to a side street and shoved him into a dark alley. The bank was a two-story building next to the Oasis Hotel on the northeast corner of the square. Six-foot alleyways separated it on one side from the hotel wall and on the other from the long, windowless wall of the town's largest hardware store. In the rear was a dark, somewhat

littered open space into which wagons could be driven with hotel supplies. A wagon was standing there now. There were lights in the hardware store, but the bank was dark and somber.

Hardrock was nervous when they stopped and leaned against the wagon. Ted started to build a querly and the ex-convict watched him with eyes that strained themselves in the faint light. Ted was keenly conscious of the man's hawk-eyed watchfulness, saw the hand resting on gun butt. They waited ten minutes before Shinn came tiptoeing through the darkness and found them.

"The Johnny Laws are all out, like we planned," Shinn said, a jittery haste in his speech which his words failed to justify. "It's all set like a millionaire banquet for you, kid. The town's supper time, when nobody'll be lookin' for nothin'.

"Now listen. We'll jimmy a window on the side of the bank president's office here at the back of the alley 'side o' the hardware. You go on through the boss's office into a hall that'll take you front. That's where the caging shuts off the money handlers and the safe from the customers. The safe is old 'nough to have gray whiskers. Sets in a corner to your left, on the hotel side. I hung round t'other day long 'nough to see 'em open it and put some dough in a tall drawer at the bottom.

"And git this straight, Kid Brody. We done our part linin' this up. You do yours and bring us a-plenty fat, or we'll tip the folks in Cheyenne 'bout where they'll find you. We'll mosey into the hotel and git us a room. You come soon's you're loaded with fat and git you a room there. Find out what room we got and slip a note under our door with your room number on it. Come on. Them bankers might come back for after-supper work."

Brody was going through the hot and cold shakes. What if the bank had a night guard Shinn hadn't learned about? He would be tabbed in the act even though he didn't touch the safe. He saw that Hardrock Kellin never ceased watching his every movement and kept that hand constantly on gun butt.

THEY crept across the faint sifting of light from the hardware store and slunk into the alley beside the bank wall. Shinn worked on the window with tools he had brought, while Hardrock kept himself at Brody's back. There came to Brody's ears a few small sounds of metal clicking and grating on metal, then the wooden window frame squeaked and slid upward. They boosted Brody head-on through the opened window into a pitch dark room. He scrambled down on hands and knees upon a rag carpet and stood up as quickly as possible.

When he whirled to look out the window, Shinn was pulling it down, tightly closed again. Ted glanced fearfully around at the wall of darkness in the room. He was surprised to see a pale gray frame of light twenty feet away across the room. Panicky with a fear of being caught here, he stepped quickly toward that other window, intending to get out of the bank as quickly as he could. Shinn and Kellin would likely watch the west window for a short while to see that he didn't flunk his work.

He stumbled lightly on a chair in his haste to reach that other window, angled around a desk and more chairs, came to the frame of the window and began fumbling at the clamp lock. He slipped the lower sash up gently a few inches, then stopped suddenly and dropped below the sill. Someone was in that hotel alley, coming toward the window from the rear, talking in low tones. He lifted his head to peer out as he recognized Kellin's mumbling voice. The fellow stopped and struck a light for his cigarette, raking the match on the bank wall.

"You damn fool!" Buck Shinn

warned, low and vibrant with anger. "You want that deputy to ketch us hangin' round here and tag us with the kid? Snuff that light and come on!"

"You're gittin' skittish as hell, Buck," Kellin replied softly. He finished lighting his smoke, threw the match away and laughed, exhaling smoke. "I sure near 'bout busted out laughin' round there when you threated the kid with that Cheyenne gag. 'S funny he ain't got hep that the ol' bank guard coot what run 'im off the job that night is done kicked the bucket. Gosh damn! I cain't hardly wait to bust out all over with laughin' when they hand 'im what he let 'em hand us!"

"You forty kinds of damn fool!" Shinn's fading voice rasped as the two slithered on toward the hotel front. Brody heard no more.

For a shivering long moment he squatted by the partly open window, icy cold with a hateful rage.

"Vengeance stuff!" he boiled out at last between gritted teeth. Now it was clear why they had left him his gun. Caught in the commission of a crime wearing a gun would draw double penalty.

Then he came alive with a jerk. He thought there was a rattle on the front door of the bank. That would be the deputy Shinn had in some way tipped off. Voices bulged up suddenly outside the west window, through which he had been boosted a few minutes before.

"This window is still closed," a man's tones came muffled through the window and across the dark room. "You hop to the back, Sully, and see he don't slip out there."

Ted Brody didn't wait for more. He slipped the window up and dropped lightly out into the dark alley, pulled the window down. On feathery feet he ran back into the darkness behind the hotel. He stumbled out between smelly barrels of kitchen refuse and found himself on the side street. A pale street lamp up on the hotel corner lighted his way as he walked around to the front of the hostelry. He went slowly, his breath coming easier, lips tightened.

STEPPING up onto the expansive wooden veranda of the hotel, he leaned against a supporting pillar of the overhanging marquee. Two men sat smoking and talking on the otherwise deserted veranda. There was a drone of voices in the dining room on the side next to the bank. Several people were in the lobby.

While he stood with his back to that lobby he heard Hardrock Kellin's laughter again. He twisted his face around, with Stetson pulled low over his face, and glanced inside. Kellin and Shinn were going up the broad stairway, going to the room they had secured, laughing already over their clever scheme to punish him. Instead of killing him as he might have expected, they had planned to send him to the prison where they had spent five years of just punishment.

His hand dropped to the gun at his hip and he started to go in and follow them. The ancient fear they had long ago instilled in the boy he had been was broken at last. He was a man with a gun that he had learned to handle as fast and deadly as the two of them combined could shoot. When he finished with them—

He halted after two steps toward the hotel. A man who wore a silver star on his vest front came upon the veranda from the direction of the bank. Ted did not remember him as one of the lawmen in office here five years back. A weazened little man with the dissipated look of a saloon hanger-on trotted along beside the officer.

"He tol' me to wait twenty minutes," the little man was insistently declaring to the law-starred, gun-wearing man, "then run an' tell you that you'd find a safecracker at work in the bank. I swear it, Mister Gowan, I swear it."

"Well, either he lied, or you're telling me another o' your smoke dreams," the lawman said, stopping to grasp the bleary-eyed wreck by the scruff of his ragged shirt. "You hang round here and watch out till you see 'im. If he's a stranger in town, like you say, he'll likely be getting a room here for the night. Don't talk to me no more till you find 'im."

"Yessir," the little fellow promised meekly, looking from Ted Brody to the pair of smokers in the veranda chairs. He slumped down against the wall beside the wide doorway.

The sheriff glanced at Ted and spoke to the two men in the chairs as he sat down near them. There was a little stir of excitement at the hotel registry counter. Ted Brody noticed it gathering volume when his attention drew away from the sheriff and the humble little informer. He went on into the lobby, approaching the counter.

"Are you absolutely sure, Mrs. Flint?" the half-bald registry clerk was asking of an excited, middle-aged woman before the counter. "I wouldn't want to call the sheriff and cause any guests trouble unless you're double certain."

Two other women and three men had gathered with the excited woman as the latter beat her hand nervously on the counter and in subdued voice rattled out words that tumbled over one another.

"I tell you I saw that man's bushy black eyebrows over his big red-striped handkerchief when two of them held us up last week on the Bannockton stage. They took over two hundred dollars from my husband and a lot from the other passengers. I tell you, I wouldn't forget those eyebrows in a thousand years! As soon as my husband comes back, he'll—"

"All right, Mrs. Flint, I'll send for Sheriff Gowan right away," the clerk promised quietly. "Just keep in the background. We'll handle it. What can I do for you, stranger?"

He looked at Ted Brody when the latter leaned on the counter, still pale and tight-lipped with the maddening hatred within him as he glanced at the registry book. He saw the last two names on the leaf of the book, noted the single room number assigned to those names and turned away.

"Nothing now, pardner," he told the clerk.

He walked toward the stairway and shook his head to throw off the fog before his eyes. He scarcely felt the floor under his feet. From somewhere behind him he heard his name called out in a feminine voice.

"Ted! Ted Brody!" Ann Harrington called from the dining room entrance. She was coming toward him. "What in the world are you doing in Grand Crossing?"

He looked at her, started to speak. Her father was just behind her. The old rancher waved a hand at him as he started up the steps. He waved his left hand at the two of them and barely opened his lips as he called low to Ann: "I'll be down in a minute, Ann. Wait!"

THERE was a sudden hush in the lobby. A dozen people looked up at him. He knew that his appearance must be strange to them in some way. He hastened his steps. He was running by the time he cleared the top and streaked down the hall, looking for Room 22. He found it almost immediately, halting his booted feet quickly on the hall rug. With an effort at restraint of his jumpy muscles, he tapped lightly on the door. Already he had heard the voices of the two devils within. He had his .45 drawn in his right hand.

"Who's there?" Buck Shinn demanded through the door.

"Ted. Open up quick!"

"What the hell!" the door opened a small crack. "Git back to the side, Hardrock. It's the ki—"

Ted slammed a vicious kick at the door bottom and lunged on the panel at the same time. Shinn staggered backward against the wall. Hardrock Kellin was leaping across by the foot of a bed, dragging for his gun. Ted

remembered that Hardrock was the more deadly with the six-gun. He lifted his gun and threw one shot at the bushy-browed fellow, saw him flinch and start falling to his knees.

Shinn's gun thundered in his face then, burning his skin with the flame. Something like a long, red-hot knife seared his neck and the top of his shoulder. Ted thumbed two quick shots into the solid mass of Buck Shinn's chest. He saw the tall ex-convict slumping down by the dresser, weakly trying to thumb out another shot.

A mingled roar of men's voices and women's screams came from beyond the door as Ted whirled on a roaring gun that spouted flame from behind the bed. A deadening paralysis seized him. He guessed it was lead, but he had not felt its impact. Hardrock Kellin was still able to shoot and he was shooting fast.

Ted dropped his gun, his right hand suddenly too numb to hold it. He fell to the floor and seized the gun with his left hand. A red wetness sagged his shirt front, sticking the cloth to his skin. Hardrock Kellin thought he was done for and leaped up from his hiding place behind the bed. Blood scarleted his swarthy face. The wild light of the killer was in his glaring black eyes. Then he gave a sudden start as he drew back to thumb his gun again.

Ted Brody's left hand was still good. That hand had lifted the heavy .45 to finish what his first shot had not done. A woman was screaming hysterically out in the hallway.

"That's him, sheriff! The black eyebrows— Look out!"

Kellin's gun was whipping down for the shot at his stooping antagonist. Brody's left arm was weak. His thumb struggled vainly to sweep the hammer back. He dropped flat on the floor when he saw that other gun yawning its black-holed mouth at him. In that instant there were twin roars, one coming from beyond the door. Kellin wilted, eyes widely staring, mouth open with a stifled cry.

Brody struggled to sit up. The law-starred man called Gowan bulged into the room, holding a gun threateningly upon him, ordering him to put his hands up. Ann Harrington flew in past the sheriff, shoving the lawman's gun aside. She fell down to her knees beside Ted, gathering him in her arms as he lay back, too weak to sit up.

"Why did you do it, Ted?" Ann was pleading wildly. "Why? Why? Darling! What brought you here?"

He smiled up at her. The sheriff stooped over Hardrock Kellin's body, then came over to examine Buck Shinn.

"Sweetheart," Ted told Ann, "my hands—they wasn't so clean. If them two smoke devils from hell are dead, my hands are whiter'n snow now—washed plumb clean with hot lead."

"I'll say they are, pardner," Sheriff Gowan acclaimed, leaning over him and the girl. "I don't see through it whole yet, but whatever drove you to this ruckus, you sure done a good job. These be a pair of bad ones that had it coming to 'em. I'll get a doctor up here right quick."

He ran out the door, past the gathering knot of curious people. Ann was holding Ted's head on her lap while she kissed him and murmured words that made him think again of home and peace.

Pawn of Skeleton Gulch

By Russell A. Bankson

When gold greed turned an honest hombre into a wolf ready for the kill, his partner savvied it was time to go on the prod.

CHARLEY COFFEEPOT stared into Pete Caraher's bloodshot eyes and saw the flames of murder that burned in them. He knew from the moment they uncovered the rich gold ledge in Skeleton Gulch that Pete was going to kill him and take everything. He turned from the scene of the strike, leaving Pete alone to grovel in the sand, clawing at the quartz, tearing out the stringers of yellow gold.

He sat down on a boulder, in the blistering sun, trying to think. He was still there an hour later, when Pete went to the spring at the head of the gulch, his bleeding hands filled with rich quartz. He was going to wash some of the gold, and see what it looked like when it was dripping wet.

Charley moved over to their tent. He got his six-shooter and strapped it around his loins. Then he went back to the ledge and took up his short-handled pick, setting to work breaking down the quartz where the gold lay in free stringers as long as a man's finger.

After a while Pete returned from the spring. Charley watched him, resting a hand on the butt of his gun. Pete's little pig eyes were glassy. His thick lips were half parted in a soundless snarl—the greedy snarl of a wolf

at the kill. Using his prospector's hammer, he pulverized the quartz which Charley had knocked loose, sorting out the lump gold, letting the finer stuff go. The nuggets he shoved into his pockets.

They kept at the work until dark. Then Charley went back to the campsite where he cooked their meal. Pete took the gold they had gleaned, and played with it, never letting Charley touch it.

Charley thought: "He's plannin' to kill me an' take all of it." Then he said aloud, "Chuck's ready."

Pete ate ravenously of the sidepork and flapjacks, stuffing the food into his mouth with his fingers, washing it down with gulps of scalding tea. Charley kept his gun out in full view. Pete was a hog. If they were on the desert, with only enough water for one of them, Pete would take it, Charley thought.

The next day they went ahead with their work on the ledge. And thereafter, for days, Charley swung the pick and Pete gathered and hoarded the gold.

One day Pete looked at Charley and asked: "Why you packin' that gun?"

"In case of anything," Charley answered, going on picking.

"They ain't no loads fer it," Pete challenged.

"Mebbe I saved out a bullet," said Charley.

Pete kept on sorting out the nuggets and dropping them into a tin pail. That pail had come to have significance. Charley knew that when it was filled, Pete would be ready to kill him. The hard work would be finished. The pail was now overflowing. Pete stared at his partner.

"I'm pullin' stakes at dark, an' travelin' nights," he mouthed.

"It's half mine," Charley said stubbornly.

Pete got slowly to his feet, a leering grin on his bearded face. He was clutching his hammer in his hamlike fist. He moved toward his partner. Charley wrapped his fingers about the butt of his gun, half drawing it from its holster. Pete stopped and threw back his head, laughing raucously.

"Sure," he said finally. "Sure it's half your'n, Charley!"

After that they got ready for the long and perilous trip across the Moclips desert to Stardust. When the burro was loaded, there remained only the gold to care for, and the filling of the two big canvas water bags. Pete looked after the gold. He wouldn't trust it out of his sight, even here in Skeleton Gulch, alone with his partner. So Charley gathered up the water bags. They were more important to them than the gold, in crossing the Moclips. But Pete didn't think so. He didn't even look up when Charley headed for the spring.

With the bags bulging, Charley packed them back to camp, where Pete had the gold stowed away on the burro. He hefted the containers, seeing they were filled to capacity. Then he hung them on the pack and started the burro.

Darkness overtook them before they had fairly gotten started. Pete led the way, as he always did, moving with long, machinelike strides that were tireless. The burro, its head down, followed doggedly in his footsteps. And bringing up the rear came Charley Coffeepot.

They traveled steadily all that first night, guided by the stars. Every two hours Pete would pause, waiting until Charley and the burro caught up with him. Then he'd demand the water bag, and wet his lips from it, letting a few drops trickle down his throat. And Charley would take a swallow, too.

DAWN came out of the east. Almost without warning, there was the fiery red sun, rolling over the rim of the earth, sucking the moisture from their bodies. Pete stretched out at the base of a low mesa and was instantly asleep. Charley cat-napped through the long day, until the shadows began to creep across the desert. Then they ate, and once more

moved out onto the floor of the Moclips.

When they halted in the darkness, Charley would take his position where he could see the profile of Pete's body. He expected his partner to slip his big, sharp-edged knife from its sheath, and plunge it into his heart.

Just before daybreak they entered the mouth of a deep, black canyon through which they must pass. Charley was filled with misgivings. Here would be the place for his greedy partner to turn upon him and strike him down.

Ahead, Pete's steps faltered in the inky blackness. Stumbling along behind, Charley listened, letting his thoughts possess him. Nor was he greatly surprised when he heard Pete feeling his way back toward him. He gripped the stock of his gun, waiting.

"What you want, Pete?" he demanded.

Pete came on without answering. Charley put his back against the canyon wall.

"Don't come no closer, Pete!" he warned. "I'm coverin' you!"

Pete's shuffling feet paused. He chuckled. Charley drew a moist tongue across his dry lips.

"What you scairt of, Charley?" Pete flung out into the thick, heavy silence. "Hand me the canteen."

"Here is it," Charley said with relief, lifting the partially emptied water bag with one hand, while he held his gun in the other. Pete struck a match. In the sudden flare he saw Charley standing with the water bag and his gun. And Charley got a look at Pete's face. There was a sinister leer on it.

The bag was three-fourths empty. But the second night was almost gone.

"Gotta make this bag last through most of t'morrer night," Pete said, hefting it. Then he chuckled, in a way that sent a shiver along Charley's spine.

When the second day overtook them, Pete removed the gold pouches from the pack and thrust his hands into them, fondling the yellow metal. His pig eyes were glittering, in behind his heavy beard. And every now and then he glanced at Charley and chuckled.

Charley waited until Pete slept. Then he propped his back against a boulder, facing Pete, with his gun on his lap. He knew that Pete's scheming brain hadn't been idle; knew that the time was almost at hand, when Pete would strike. But he was so dead tired that he couldn't keep his eyes open. When, hours later, he was awakened by the burro tramping near him, he sprang to his feet with his gun out. Only Pete was still sleeping soundly, clutching the gold pouches.

The suffocating desert day had passed, so Charley fixed their meal. Pete aroused at the smell of food. But when he had stuffed himself, he delayed his departure. Instead, he slowly drew his long, double-edged knife from its sheath. He was a huge man, standing over six feet, and broad-shouldered.

"Charley," he said, "I'm gonna kill you!"

Charley tilted the barrel of his gun, so that the muzzle covered Pete.

"Stay away or I'll pull the trigger!" he warned.

Pete kept on coming. "You ain't bluffin' me with a empty gun!" he rasped

"Like I said, mebbe I found another bullet!"

Pete's laugh taunted him. "Ever since we made the strike, I been figgerin', Charley," he said. "We had a box of bullets. An' I've remembered where every one of 'em was fired. They ain't none left!"

"You could 'a' made a mistake."

"I didn't though. So I'm gonna kill you!"

"You're takin' a chance!" Charley flung back, holding his ground.

Pete's eyes were glazed. He was studying his partner, and Charley saw the first flicker of doubt beginning to show. These two were stripped to the lowest level, where there is but one law, the survival of the fittest.

"No," Pete said. "It's a hundred to one in my favor."

Charley Coffeepot didn't flinch. He kept on looking steadily at Pete.

"Say I only got a hundredth chance," he countered. "Well, I'll bet that agin' your ninety-nine chances—winner take all, Pete."

Pete grew suspicious. "How?" he asked.

"We'll draw straws," Charley said. "The long straw wins. Then we divide the grub an' water, an' the loser'll head south fer the Peculis country."

Pete thought this over, looking for a catch. He thought about that one hundredth chance that there was a bullet in Charley's gun. His eyes grew beady.

"I'll fix the straws an' hold 'em," he said, nodding his shaggy head.

Pete used his knife to clip a twig from a mesquite bush. He shaped two sticks, which he held in his extended hand. Charley drew one.

"You lose!" Pete rasped, tossing his stick away without giving Charley a chance to compare them. But Charley didn't protest.

"Go ahead an' divide the stuff," he said to Pete.

The big man went through the grub pack, and tossed aside a meager portion for Charley. Then he looked at the two water bags. One of them had not been touched yet. The other was only a fourth full. Pete laid the lighter one with Charley's supplies.

"That'll do you," he said, though he knew it wasn't enough to take him a third of the way through to the Peculis country. Still, Charley said nothing.

Pete packed the burro, balancing the gold pokes against the full water bag. Then he moved on toward Stardust, without a backward glance. Charley sat on a boulder watching him, his thin, leathery face inscrutable, until Pete had vanished from sight.

Then he tossed his empty gun away, gathered up the grub and water bag. He turned back toward Skeleton Gulch where there was water—and the gold.

"One of us hadda die," he said aloud. "Pete went an' made it that way."

He'd have to conserve his water, what little he had. But he could make it through.

But Pete! Charley had seen the length of the stick which Pete had trown away. He had thought, when he planned the drawing, that Pete would claim the long one. He had thought also that Pete would divide the food and water the way he had.

That was why he had taken that hundredth chance, and filled one of the bags with water, and the other one with moist sand!

High-Tailin' Hangman

By Jack Sterrett

Hate-ridden by bitterness inflamed in a stone corral, Hondo Jones rode into Costa County gunning for a man. But when Hondo got himself tangled in hangman's hemp, the hombre he was trailing saved him—saved him to fling him into a hell-storm of smoke and lead.

THE tall, skinny puncher swallowed his craw. He was pretty white, but he kept from trembling by stiffening his back. The posture made him look straight and unafraid up there on his horse, the rope around his neck strung up to the strong tree-limb above. There was a twisted grin on his wide, thin mouth, defiant, grim humor in his blue eyes.

"Gents," he drawled steadily, "I—this here hangin' now. It's a thing I ain't accustomed to. You want me to draw up my heels an' kick or am I supposed to just sorta slide off?"

The little knot of dismounted, hard-faced men below him stirred restlessly. A burly, big-shouldered man shoved back his hat and snarled with thick lips.

"Hondo," he growled, "you can joke in hell if you like, but we sure ain't funnin'. We mean business." He looked at a big watch that he had

pulled from his pocket. "You got two minutes in which to make up your mind. If you got any sense at all, you'll confess to killin' Joe Meehan. Otherwise, you won't have to jump, slide or nothin'. I'll just quirt that hoss an'—" He shrugged his shoulders.

The skinny puncher stared down for another instant, his smile frozen and ghastly. Then he shrugged his shoulders and his blue eyes wavered away as he looked hopelessly around. This was no conventional hanging, held in a jail yard or town square. The rope around his neck was strung to the only sizable tree in an otherwise brush-covered, rolling rangeland.

As the lank cowboy stared into blue distance, he could feel the slow, heavy pounding of his heart ticking off the precious seconds. He saw a small, twisting column of dust in the brush. There was a swirling dust devil out there. Well, he would never feel the warmth of the sun again, never smell again the sweetness of the wind in the sage. His blue gaze wandered back sightlessly to the burly, snarling big man below him.

"Well, Granger," he said huskily, "you do just what Luther Breed hired you to do. I'd have killed Meehan awright if Breed hadn't got to him first. You'd been saved this trouble. Only thing is, I ain't writin' no confession just to save Breed's dirty hide." His lips twisted in a wry grin. "You see—you'd hang me even if I did confess!"

The big gunhand swore. "You mean you won't? By hell, Hondo, am I gonna have to heat up a brandin' iron?"

Hondo laughed bitterly. "You'd do anythin' to earn your pay, wouldn't you, Granger? Well, hell—do your worst."

The pale, colorless eyes of the burly man were furious. Lurid, malevolent curses streamed from his lips. He whirled on one of the dead-panned, impassive men behind him.

"Awright! He asked for it! Get wood an' start a fire!"

Hondo, turning his eyes away from the man's ugly, writhing features, stiffened suddenly.

Moving soundlessly out of the tall brush, a powerful chestnut gelding had shuffled into the soft dust of the trail. That dust devil he had seen? Perhaps. And seated on the big horse was a motionless, lithe figure of a man, alert and powerful. Hondo could not see his face. The rider's wide-brimmed hat was pulled low and a handkerchief was tight over the bridge of his nose. Hondo caught only a flash of stabbing, gray eyes. His heart leaped, raced madly for an instant.

THE stranger was a scant ten yards away. A brace of big-bore six-guns poised as motionless and deadly in his strong, brown hands as the heads of a pair of rattlers. His voice struck the group of gunhands under the tree with the paralyzing shock of complete surprise.

"Hands high, gents! Easy—e-easy! Don't make a move that you might regret."

The men whirled with grunted, sharp curses. Some, even, flicked their hands toward their six-guns. But they froze in oddly awkward attitudes. Instantly, they realized that the stranger was utterly deadly, that he was ready on the flicker of an eyelash to drop the hammers of his unwavering guns.

The handkerchief over the rider's high-arched nose wavered softly to his breath. His eyes were glittering splinters of ice, his voice a disguised, high-pitched drawl. He twitched a long-barreled gun toward the hate-frozen Granger.

"You got the look of leadin' this play," the high voice murmured. "Take the hemp off that puncher's neck. Release his hands an' feet."

Hondo grunted gratefully as his arms, neck and legs were released. He grinned as he fingered his throat and looked down into Granger's helpless, murderous glare. He leaned down from the saddle and scooped up his hat from the ground. The stranger

was again issuing instructions in his high monotone.

"Unbuckle your gunbelts, gents, an' drop 'em on the ground. All right. Head yourselves down the trail ahead of us while we ride away."

Hondo grinned appreciatively as they followed the shambling, cursing knot of men down the trail. He caught a gray eye glancing at him from under the stranger's hat-brim and he was sure that it winked.

"All right," the lithe stranger said finally. "You fellers can step aside now, an' let us go. Reckon we'll be clear over the next ridge an' gone before you can get back to your guns an' hosses. *Adios*, Granger!"

Slashing back with their spurs, Hondo and the stranger shot away through the sage while the men afoot raced back toward their horses in a sweating, cursing stampede. All except Granger, that is. He, for a long minute, stood alone in the dust of their going and watched the fugitives disappear. And, looking back as they swung over a ridge, Hondo saw him there and waved his hand derisively.

When Hondo looked back, the strange rider had unmasked, revealing a lean, strong face with a thin-nostriled beak of a nose and a wide, harsh mouth. A strangled, wild curse leaped to Hondo's lips as he slid his horse to his haunches. Joe Meehan, Sheriff Joe Meehan of Costa County, the man who had sent him to the penitentiary for six long months and whom he had sworn to kill the day he got back! Joe Meehan, who was supposed to be dead!

The lithe, powerful sheriff had been watching Hondo keenly, had been expecting some wild move when the puncher recognized him. He whirled his gelding, one of those deadly, big six-guns leaping up from his holster to menace the mouthing, wildly cursing cowboy.

"Steady, Hondo," the sheriff commanded in crisp, hard tones. "Don't let your temper run away with you. You ain't armed."

Hondo exhausted his hate of this man whom he had regarded his worst enemy, wore out his voice in a slow, acid stream of cursing. His prison-paled face was white, his teeth bared, his blue eyes ugly with his utter contempt.

"By hell, Meehan," he ended, "I'd sooner have died an' gone to hell than been rescued by you!"

THE sheriff's hawklike, browned features looked strained and tight under the terrible stream of Hondo's hate. When the cowboy had finished, his lips parted slightly in a fleeting, thin smile.

"Well, I sure hope you're plumb finished. I couldn't have stood a lot more of that. And now, let's get a move on. We'll have to ride plenty to keep outa sight of that gang of hangmen behind us."

Hondo's face was twisted into a hard, white mask. "Where we goin'?"

"To town—to Costa jail," Meehan grunted shortly.

Hondo laughed harshly. "By heaven, you sure believe in keepin' me corraled, don't you, Meehan? But the devil! Don't you know that I'll get out again some day? Don't you know that, just as sure as I do, I'll kill you? What's the faked-up charge this time?"

"The murder of Luther Breed," Meehan said with an odd look.

Hondo grunted as though struck. The punches were coming too fast today! He jerked a thumb toward the rear. "If Breed's dead, why were those fellers tryin' to get me to confess to *your* death? Why are you supposed to be outa circulation? The way they acted, I was sure Breed had killed you. So Breed's dead! Don't they know it?"

"No," Meehan interrupted sharply, "they don't know it—yet. And now, stow the gab an' just ride!"

"But," Hondo yelped, "I didn't kill Breed! I ain't even seen 'im!"

"I know that, too," Meehan grunted grimly. "High-tail, I say!"

Hondo, his brain reeling, had no

choice. His holsters were empty and Meehan's face, behind his deadly six-gun, was grimly determined. Besides, in the distance behind them, a rolling dust cloud was coming fast. Swooping over the rolling hills like hawks, Hondo and the grim, lithe sheriff high-tailed for Costa.

In the jail office at Costa, Sheriff Meehan and Hondo Jones faced each other silently for a few seconds. Then, under Hondo's hard, suspicious stare, Meehan shrugged and turned away and sat down. There was a queer, bitter twist to his lips as he stared out the window.

"Sit down, Hondo," Meehan said quietly, "an', for the next few minutes, let me do most of the talkin'. We gotta work fast. It won't take Granger long to trail us here, an' I got a lot of things to rope an' tie down before he arrives."

Hondo, tense and staring, was suspicious. This man Meehan was hard. Costa County had trembled for years under his harsh, unswerving justice. There was no mercy in him, only a fanatic devotion to duty. Meehan had refused to listen to him, Hondo, before he had sent him to prison. And Hondo, hate-ridden by the bitterness inflamed during six months of rotting, undeserved punishment, had sworn to kill the man. Why should he listen to him now? And yet there was something in Meehan's harsh, fierce face, something that Hondo had never seen there before.

"Well," Hondo rasped reluctantly, "go ahead an' talk. I'll listen."

Meehan talked fast. "A little over six months ago," he said, "you killed a man. At least, I thought you did. Every scrap of evidence was against you and it was plumb convincing. I tried hard to get you hung. I thought it was my duty—" Meehan was staring hard out the window—"in spite of the fact that I loved your sister!"

Hondo caught his breath. He had not known that!

"But your lawyer was clever and keen," Meehan went on swiftly. "He succeeded in clouding the facts and you got off with six months because he convinced the jury that it was possible that you had shot in self-defense."

"I didn't even shoot at all!" Hondo said hoarsely.

"I know that now," Meehan said in a low voice. "All the evidence against you was brought by Breed and Granger. It was all a part of a rotten frameup to get you outa the way so they could grab your ranch."

HONDO'S face was white. "Kate wrote me," he grunted harshly. "Breed has made life a hell for her while I been in jail. I took an oath I'd kill Breed, too—after I got you. Breed hasn't got our place?"

"No," Meehan said, his eyes moody. "Breed ran into a fighter when he tried to break your sister. She fought 'im every step of the way. She—" his lips were white—"even came to me for help. To *me*, the man who had sent *you* to jail! An' it was then when I began to understand what a polecat Breed was, that I became suspicious of the killin' that had sent you away. Hondo — Luther Breed an' Stew Granger killed that man!"

Stunned, stiff, Hondo stared at the sheriff. "You got proof of that?" he croaked.

Meehan's face looked gray. "No. An' perhaps I never will have. But I'm sure of it!" For a moment there was a look that was as near to pleading as was possible on the sheriff's keen, hawklike face. "Hondo, can you forgive me for bein' so tough on you? Believe me, there's a reason that you an' me got to work together now—got to work hard!

"I tried to catch you before you could get into town today, but you fooled me by avoidin' the stage an' comin' in alone on a hired horse. You fell right into Granger's hands. Hondo, Breed an' Granger was aimin' to put you away again, an' for good this time!"

"I know!" Hondo yelped. "I was supposed to have killed you, like I

threatened while I was in jail. They were gonna force a confession outa me, then hang me! How come you're alive?"

Again Meehan was staring out the window and his face was as hard as stone. "Breed had a trap laid for me all right," he said gratingly. "He sent a message that I was needed out at his place early this mornin' an' he was layin' to back-shoot me when I showed up." The sheriff's face twisted. "You see, I'd told Breed an' Granger what I thought of 'em. They were scared that I'd learned too much about that killin' they had accused you of. They needed to kill me! An', like you say, they figgered to have you finished off for doin' it. That would've cleared up everythin' for them!"

"Well," Hondo broke in tensely, "an' what happened out at Breed's? You've told me he was killed."

"Yeh," Meehan breathed through white, tight lips. "An' I saw the killin' done. An, what's more, you're gonna say that you did it!"

Hondo was speechless. For a few seconds, then, Meehan's voice was low and urgent, his stabbing, gray gaze intent on Hondo's. And, while he listened, Hondo felt all the life drain out of his body, felt the ice of a deadly chill replace the blood in his veins. His blue eyes went dull and sightless. He nodded.

"I got it," he said in a hoarse whisper. "An' I'll back you in anythin' you say. Anythin'!"

A smile flashed in Meehan's eyes. For an instant his face was transformed as he eagerly grasped the cowboy's outstretched hand. Then, swiftly, he stiffened. There was a sudden, roaring clatter of horses outside, a shouting of hoarse voices.

The sheriff whipped a six-gun from one of his holsters and thrust it into Hondo's hands. "Here—push that into your shirt. Use it if anythin' goes wrong!"

Swiftly, Hondo thrust the gun away. He stepped quickly aside, stood as still and grim as a splinter of stone as Granger and three hard-faced followers stormed into the room.

FOR a long moment after their smashing entrance, Stew Granger and the trio behind him stared unspeakingly at Sheriff Meehan. Granger's bull neck pulsed. His pale, colorless eyes bore a look of bewildered, stunned disbelief. His gaze flickered to Hondo and back to the sheriff again. Suddenly his thick lips ripped open on an ugly snarl.

"By hell, Meehan," the burly gunman rumbled, "I thought it was you that grabbed that killer away from us! I figgered that I sure knew that hoss you was ridin'. But you—" He fumbled for words.

"But I," Meehan supplied with an icy drawl, "was supposed to be dead! That it, Granger?"

Granger's face went purple. His heavy features writhed with fury. For an instant, it looked as though he would lose control and Hondo's right hand crept upward toward the opening in his shirt.

With an effort, Granger found his voice, his pale, venomous eyes flickering toward Hondo as he talked to Meehan.

"I dunno what that coyote has been tellin' you, Meehan," he snarled. "Whatever it was, you can figger it was a lie. He's rotten all the way through. He rode in here today loaded up with weapons like a Mexican general, an' turnin' the air blue with the threats that he was gonna kill both you an' Breed. We caught 'im. That lynchin' scene you saw us at was just a fake. We figgered to throw a scare into Hondo that would last, then run 'im clear outa the county."

"Thanks," Meehan said drily, his gray eyes stabbing and scornful. "It was plumb nice of you to protect me that way, Granger. But you was a little late to do your boss any good."

Granger looked uncertain. "What you talkin' about?"

"Breed's dead," Meehan said softly.

"An' I killed 'im!" Hondo broke in harshly.

There was a wild curse, a choked snarl or two, from the men behind Granger. The big gunhand, himself, looked as though the blood had been smashed from his face by a blow. His voice was a harsh, cracking whisper through trembling lips. "Talk sense!"

"That seems to shake you up," Meehan said icily. "An' it should! You see, I was called out to Breed's this mornin'. Breed was layin' to kill me when I got there. But Hondo got there just behind me. He saved my life by shootin' Breed when Breed threw down on me. I turned Hondo loose on his promise to show up at my office later an' make a statement. You snakes caught 'im on his way into town."

Granger's hands were shaking. His face was a sickly green. "You're talkin' words, Meehan. I ain't believin' it all right now. Did Breed die right away?"

"No," Meehan drawled, "an' ain't that a pity? He talked before he died. The fear of death was on 'im an' he wanted to free his conscience. He confessed about his an' your part in the murder for which Hondo went to jail. He confessed to the rustlin' an' maverickin' that you an' he have been practisin' in the effort to ruin Hondo's sister. He confessed to the plot that was laid agin Hondo an' me today. He—"

But it was enough and more than Granger could stand. Meehan's slow, icy drawl bore the deadliness of certain conviction. With a sudden, strangled scream, eyes almost popping from his face, the burly gunman made a wild stab for his low-holstered six-guns. The wildly cursing trio behind him, in on this with their leader and with no way out, were only split seconds slower. With awful speed, their guns came up together.

Four men against two! A half-dozen yammering, bellowing forty-fives against two! Meehan did not move from his seat behind his desk. His own gun whipped up like stabbing light. Hondo flashed to a crouch, turned sideways. And, for a deadly, screaming few seconds, their two forty-fives were more than a match for the hell-storm that jammed the room with smoke and lead.

Six swift, accurate shots—and then Hondo was smashed bodily backward into a corner. A curtain of blood obscured his sight. He tensed himself for the next sledge-hammering slug.

It failed to come. Silence, broken only by a sobbing, deep groan, had smothered the room.

PAINFULLY, Hondo climbed to his feet. He wiped the blood from his eyes with the back of his hand. His skull felt shattered. But he realized dully that his injury could scarcely be serious or he would not be standing. With an effort, he cleared his sight and found Meehan, still seated at his desk, looking up at him with a twisted smile.

The sheriff sat in an oddly strained, unnatural way, his lips pale. "I'm as leaky as an old boot, Hondo. I'm so full of lead," he said, "that I feel heavy. But I reckon I'm better off than those hombres!" He flickered his eyes away and Hondo looked.

Hondo choked, holding himself steady by a harsh effort of the will. He and Meehan had done their ghastly work well. Three of the gunmen were dead in a shattered, bloody heap. The fourth was dying rapidly and beyond help. Hondo looked back and Meehan's grin was grim.

"You'll have to be gettin' me a sawbones pretty quick, Hondo," the sheriff whispered faintly. "I don't know if I'll live. If I do, don't worry none about your sister. All the confessin' that's to be done in this case was done just now—with six-guns—an' it's finished!" He closed his eyes wearily.

Hondo leaped to his side, gripped him hard by the shoulders. "Sher'ff! You ain't gonna die! Think of Kate—how she'd feel if—"

Meehan's eyes flickered open again.

"Well, mebbe I won't. I'll put up a fight. But, Hondo—if I lose, just tell Kate—that I love her." He grinned again his eyes bright. "What a woman that sister of yours is! When I got out to Breed's she was there. I reckon he hadn't been expectin' her. Mebbe she'd rode to tell 'im that the last of her patience was gone. Neither of them saw me. He was—layin' his hands on her—the dirty skunk! When she quirted him in the face, he stumbled back, tripped an' fell—an' drove an iron picket-pin right through his skull. He was dead all right. It wasn't really necessary for you to say you'd killed 'im. Only, we had to rush Granger an' the rest of his ugly crew into a gun stampede—somehow. Yeh, she's sure a woman!"

Meehan's voice wandered on. He looked around in mild, vague surprise. For Hondo wasn't there. Hondo was on a wild stampede down the street in search of Doc Schmidt. Meehan couldn't die! Hell, no, Hondo swore to his wildly thumping heart, he wouldn't let Meehan die!

Ranger for a Day

By Scotty Rand

He raised the gun and swung it downward.

Owl-hooter Smilin' Sam had always thought that lawmen were a pack of reward-grabbing wolves—until a ranger saved his life from lead poisoning. But the ranger didn't know of his blood bond with the man he had saved for the hangtree.

THE morning sun was just chasing the shadows from Tarantula road. And Smilin' Sam Duval was dying when he saw his son for the first time.

But Smilin' Sam, who had earned the nickname because of the wolfish grin he invariably gave his victims when he relieved them of their excessive money, was not smiling now. Since midnight, Sam had lain in a tortured huddle on the edge of the road. With pained, bloodshot eyes, he had watched the stars pale out to invisibility and the sky turn to crimson, then gold. A three-day bullet wound festered in his right lung, and the slug was still in his chest.

There had been a bank back in Poco City with crisp stacks of currency in its vaults, and Smilin' Sam had that bank money in a bulging gunny sack on his saddle horn. The loot was almost in reach of the dying man's hands because his faithful bronc was standing over him with trailing reins. Had been standing there with patient brown eyes ever since its master had toppled from its back from sheer weakness.

Duval would have gladly traded the whole sack for one big drink of water. The outlaw was too weak to look to the north toward Tarantula ten miles away. But by twisting his eyes, he could see that no one was coming from the south. And if no one came in a few hours, there would be a buzzard feast there in the dust and an ownerless mustang on the prairie.

He coughed weakly, and blood flecked the dirt under his graying head. Silently, he cursed the posseman who had sent the bullet his way. He thought about the half-filled canteen on his saddle for the hundredth time and tried to twist his leather-brown face toward it. How he needed some water!

Then he stopped his feeble movements and stared. A dust spot out there in the sage, a rider! That meant water! What if he were recognized and carried in to hang? It would be a quick death. Not a slow, hellish suffering while watching the vultures wait for him to close his eyes and stop his rasping breathing.

A few minutes later, the outlaw's head was cradled in a muscular arm, and water was trickling down his swollen throat. Dimly, he realized that he was being carried—fingers and hot metal probed at the hole in his chest—stabbing pain. He slipped off in a black, bottomless world.

WHEN Smilin' Sam came to, it was late in the afternoon. He was flat on his back under the shade of a scrubby piñon some hundred yards from the spot on the road where he had been picked up. A blanket roll was under his head, and a ripped shirt served as a bandage on his deep chest. The fiery ache of the wound had subsided somewhat, but he felt as weak as a newborn calf.

As he studied the broad, tan-shirted back of the hombre who squatted before a small supper fire and the strange cayuse that was picketed near his in a grassy hollow farther on, he instinctively reached for his Colts. But the lack of their dead weight at his thighs told him that his thonged-down holsters were empty.

He tried to sit up, and a stabbing agony pulsed through his stocky body. The lines in his face grew deeper, and an involuntary groan slipped from between clenched teeth.

The hombre at the fire whirled on his heels at the sound, with a brown hand hovering over a gun butt.

"Awake, huh?" he clipped and approached. "Thought for a while you were ready for boot hill."

The old owl-hooter studied the man before him with wary eyes. The fellow was young, about twenty-two or three, with brown hair and a clean-cut jaw. He seemed strangely familiar, but Duval knew that he had never seen him before.

"Naw," Smilin' Sam grinned, showing his notorious smile for the first time in many hours. "I'll live to git that sneakin' son that drygulched me," he lied.

"No drygulcher got you," answered the young man. He fumbled in his shirt pocket and drew forth a glittering object. "After seein' yore face on a dozen or so reward notices, I couldn't help but savvy yore handle. Smilin' Sam Duval, wanted in four states for up to a hundred robberies an' one killin'!"

Duval looked at the Texas Ranger badge in the hombre's hand. "Yeah, I reckon yuh got me for fair, ranger," he drawled, surprised at his inner

calmness. "Then yuh know about that Poco City job an' yuh was on my trail."

The ranger shook his head. "About the bank robbery, yes. But I wasn't on yore trail. I had another little job in mind, but I guess it can wait till yo're able tuh stand tyin' up."

"But," growled the outlaw, "why did you bother to nurse me? Yuh could've hid my body an' went on with yore present job an' picked me up later. The price on my head is good, dead or alive."

Hard-bitten Smilin' Sam looked on all lawmen with the same cynical eye. To him they were a pack of reward grabbers who forced a man to go on stealing for a living, even if he hankered to hit the straight and narrow trail. The young ranger's reply jolted him gently.

"You shore sound bitter, feller," he said with puzzled eyes. "I ain't lettin' a dog die unnecessary-like!"

Again the owl-hooter had the feeling that he knew this young badge-toter. "Pretty speech, ranger," he snarled. "And what is the handle o' the jasper who is so kind to me?"

The oldster's last words were snapping with feigned hate to cover the rising interest he felt.

"Johnny Sprague, Company B of the Texas Rangers," said the younker, smiling, evidently not aroused by Duval's sarcasm. "I made up a little soup for you. Hungry?"

Smilin' Sam ignored him and silently fought the turmoil in his heart. After a bit, he spoke again.

"What was yore mother's maiden name, J—Johnny?"

The ranger had started toward the fire, but he spun back. "Sarah Brady," he said softly, then peered intently into Sam's poker face. "Why?"

"Pretty name," allowed Smilin' Sam, and that was all the Sprague younker could get out of him.

SMILIN' SAM DUVAL regained his strength much faster than he indicated. He pretended to be too weak even to lift his head for the following three days, and the young star-toter was patient and gentle with him.

The outlaw could have arisen any of the passing nights and finished off the sleeping boy, but he didn't. Instead, he spent his time adding figures and thinking. More than once, his hard eyes swung toward the form of Johnny Sprague, and they softened in the darkness.

About twenty-three years ago, Smilin' Sam was known to his friends as Walter Sprague, a rancher who had a pretty wife named Sarah. But Fate laid her heavy hand on young Walter's happy life. One night, he was whooping it up in town and shot his best friend to death when they were both blind drunk. Or at least, eyewitnesses said that was the way it happened; Walter didn't remember.

That was the only human that Smilin' Sam Duval had ever killed and he never took another drink of redeye, but the damage was done. He skipped out to start over, but the long arm of the Law was almost on his cringing shoulder at all times, and he was forced to rob for a living. To save his wife from further disgrace, he had changed his name to Duval, and he was known along the owl-hoot trail as "Smilin' Sam."

Never again had he communicated with his wife, but he had heard that she had given birth to a son, a child that had been expected before the owl-hooter left her. And now that same boy, his boy, who looked so much like Sam when he was about the same age, was a Texas Ranger who had unknowingly captured his own sire.

On the morning of the fifth day, Johnny Sprague spoke after he had finished bandaging the healing hole in the outlaw's breast.

"I think yo're playin' possum on me, Duval," he voiced with intent blue eyes on the robber's creased face. "I'll be tyin' you up tomorrow mornin' an' goin' on in to Tarantula to git

another lawbreak. Then I'll take both of you gents in."

"Yo're goin' to Tarantula alone!" blurted Smilin' Sam. "After who?"

TARANTULA was a hell-roaring outlaw town, and Smilin' Sam knew it. In fact, he had been trying to make Tarantula to hide out because he had heard of crooked Wolf Snell, a back-shooting killer who ruled the outcast city with a gun-filled hand. It was told that there were plenty honest men around the town, but they were cowed by Snell's handful of picked gunnies.

Any ranger who rode into that gut-blasting hell-hole would come out feet first whether he intended to stick his Colt into Snell's dirty business or not. Lawman just did not exist in that town. Smilin' Sam had never met this hombre personally. But the tales that had come to his ears, convinced him that the King of Tarantula was a killer bronc, a buzzard, and a rattler rolled into one gun-hung hide.

Fear was in Duval's heart as he looked up at the younker. The kid seemed too fresh, too young to make gun fodder, to be snuffed out in his prime.

"Yeah, alone," said Johnny in an "it-might-rain-tonight" voice. "My trail pard is gittin' old, an' the saddle cramps got him back up the line. So I took the warrant for Wolf Snell's arrest an' come on."

Smilin' Sam gasped in spite of himself. "Wolf Snell!" He fought to keep his voice steady and continued. "Yuh young fool! That's not Wolf's warrant yuh got there—it's yore own warrant—a death warrant! Take me in an' git some help 'fore yuh tackle him!"

He was up on one elbow, grasping Johnny Sprague's hard arm when the young ranger smiled and shook his head.

"Then let me go with yuh, kid!" he croaked. "Let me go! I'll help yuh, honest I will! Yuh cain't go in there

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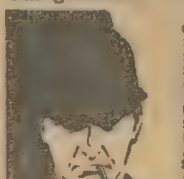

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alone. Yuh'd git a slug in yore back inside o' ten minutes!"

The younker pushed the raving outlaw back to the ground.

"Why're you so all fired anxious to save my hide?" he asked. "After all, I'm takin' yuh in to hang. If I cash in, you'll go free." He paused and looked into Sam's pleading eyes. "It just don't make sense. There's a trick up yore sleeve."

Sam wanted to shout to this brave young hellion that he was talking to his own father and that he had to help him, but he bit back the words. Only as a last resort to save the kid would he reveal their kin. No ranger wanted to meet a wanted murderer and road agent, and have that same hombre tell him that he was his own flesh and blood.

And maybe Sarah had never told this son of his about his black-painted, long-riding sire. Maybe, since there was ranger blood in Johnny's veins, he would hate to carry Smilin' Sam in and admit that his dad was owl-hooter. Maybe the kid had never heard of his outlaw sire. After that thought entered his head, Duval was plenty sure that the secret would never pass his lips; not right then at least.

No, for there was another way. If he could not talk some sense into this foolhardy younker's head, he would try his rapidly forming plan. It meant death to Smilin' Sam, but it meant continued life for this steel-nerved ranger.

And talk Sam did. He begged and pled all day from his prone position on the ground, and gradually he began to understand the insight of those grim men who rode for the Lone Star State in the name of justice. He saw why they walked into the very gaping jaws of death to protect the rights of the honest citizen.

And unconsciously, as he talked and listened, he soaked up some of those ranger characteristics from his son. Finally, he saw the futility of his

pleading and shut himself up in a hard shell of silence. But even after all the talk, Smilin' Sam did not furnish Johnny a suitable reason for his concern, and the ranger was unconvinced.

After supper, Sam spoke once more, but Johnny cut him off.

"Aw hell!" exploded Smilin' Sam. "Go on an' git killed."

He pretended to sleep.

SMILIN' SAM was a good actor. He had acted so weak that Johnny did not tie him up that night, although the ranger stood over him before unrolling his soogans with a rope in his hand.

"I'll wait until morning," he decided aloud.

In his feigned slumber, Duval sighed softly with relief and watched his son go to sleep through slitted eyes. With that patience born of endless waiting for a potential victim to come along, Smilin' Sam listened until the ranger's deep breathing told him that he was asleep.

He hated what he was planning to do, but it was absolutely necessary. After hearing the ranger's sentiments, Sam knew that his kid would charge him even in the face of a gun rather than lose his prisoner.

After a painful ten feet of snake-bellying, he was at the sleeping boy's brown head. Gently, he eased out the kid's Colt which rested in its holster near the ranger's hand.

Smilin' Sam's eyes were moist in the night as he slowly raised the gun barrel and carefully judged the force of his blow. On second thought, he gently laid the ranger's Stetson over his head to keep from breaking the boy's skin and skull.

"I shore hate to do this, son," he choked softly, and swung the gun.

Smilin' Sam Duval was weaker than he had thought. He was having trouble staying in the saddle when he hit the dirty, rutted streets of

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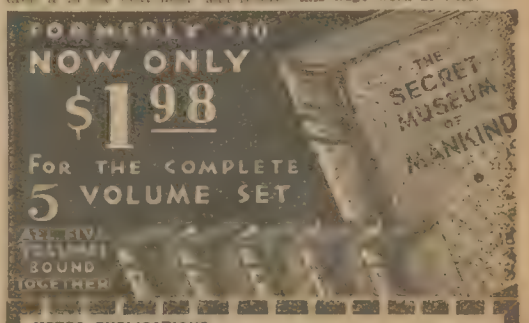

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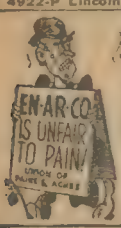

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Tarantula in his son's clothes and on his son's horse. In his pocket were the warrant and the ranger's star.

When he first started, he merely meant to kill Wolf Snell before Johnny came to and thereby save the boy from the killer's guns. But something had forced him to assume the guise of a ranger and walk into the lion's den. Now, as he drew near the end of his suicide mission, he realized that he *was* a ranger. What mattered it if someone spoke an oath and got a tin star? It was the spirit, the ranger spirit, that counted. Now he knew why the courageous badge-toters rode the gunsmoke trail!

Yeah, that was it! He was a self-appointed ranger, going to wipe out the parasites with a .45 eraser.

He passed a sign on the outskirts of the killer town that warned all lawman to stay out. Long ago, Wolf Snell had gunned down the last sheriff from behind, and none of the honest citizens dared to challenge him to a shoot-out.

Smilin' Sam had never killed but one man, and now he felt queer inside as he rode to kill his second and probably last. He was riding to his death and he knew it. But he threw back his head and laughed crazily at the wheeling stars. His smile was on his face when he unforked in front of the false-fronted, frame building which bore the sign: SNELL'S SALOON.

The whites of his eyes gleamed in the dim starlight as he tottered around the hitchrack. Dimly, he felt a warm, sticky patch on his right side. His movements had reopened the wound in his chest, but soon more blood than that would flow. Much more!

The batwing doors slammed back under his shoulder, and he blinked in the glow of the kerosene lamps. His eyes were wide and wild as he staggered over the dirty sawdust on the floor. With taloned fingers he loosened his twin death-guns in their oiled holsters.

THE merrymaking crowd in the saloon gave way before the advancing, tottering oldster who had a blood spot on his shirt front and double death in his eyes. A sudden silence gripped the huge room, and eyes swiveled in their gaping sockets.

Smilin' Sam's bloodless lips stretched taut over his strong teeth in a death's head mockery of his notorious smile. He stopped in the center of the Wolf's den and snarled his challenge.

"Wolf Snell!" he roared. *"Wolf Snell!"* He weaved uncertainly, then caught himself and went into a rock-steady gun crouch.

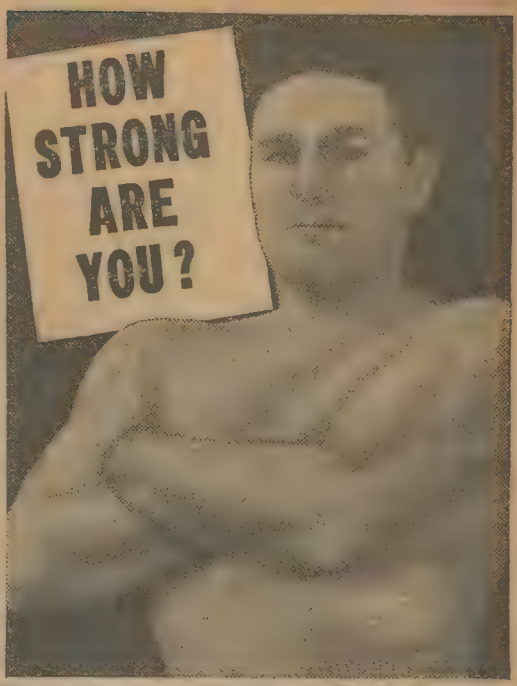
A thin, hawk-faced man with a long gambler's coat hanging on his vulturelike shoulders stepped out of the crowd. One of his hands was under the coat, evidently clutching a gun butt. With a short flip of his free hand, three hard-eyed, double-hung hombres stepped up and fanned out at his elbows.

"That's me, hombre!" rapped Snell with annoyance in his brittle voice. At first he thought it was just another drunk who was hunting trouble. But when he read the signs in Smilin' Sam's glowing, slitted eyes, he changed his mind. "What's the beef?"

Duval's crazy grin jumped wider as he fumbled in his shirt pocket. He tossed the ranger's star and the warrant into the sawdust at Wolf's booted feet.

"No beef, Snell," he snarled and crouched lower. "I'm a Texas Ranger!" His voice was proud and trumpetlike. "An' there's my star an' a warrant for yore arrest!"

People were backing slowly, leaving an ever widening alley between the four gunmen and Smilin' Sam. Then the slow retreat became a panicky rush as the crowd dived over the bar and out the flapping doors. Many in the crowd sided with the foolhardy ranger, but stark fear of Wolf Snell and his killer crew stayed their gun hands.



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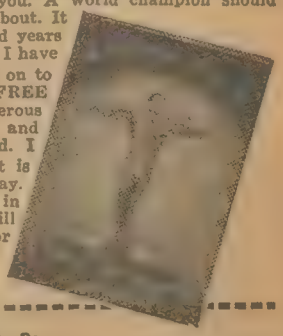

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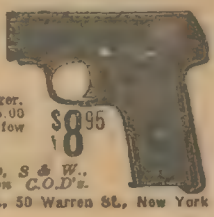

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"Yuh've come to arrest me?" Wolf's voice was incredulous. He couldn't believe that the wounded, smiling hombre had the guts to say such a thing.

Smilin' Sam's splayed fingers were brushing his Colts, stiffly. "That's the ticket, feller. Comin'?"

"Hell, no!" exploded Wolf, and his concealed hand came into the light full of six-gun. "Git the damn fool, boys!"

Smilin' Sam Duval had never killed but one man—no, but he had spent many hours on the desert in drawing and shooting practice. He had known that an hombre who rode outside of the law needed to know gun magic from A to Z. And now, he called on every bit of his skill.

His sweaty palms popped against the backstraps of his twin death tubes in a blinding, dazzling double draw that no human eyes could follow. Like the split-instant strike of a rattlesnake was that draw. The heavy Colts were singing their boot hill tune an instant before the killer crew went into powder smoke action.

Death went on a gleeful spree there in that saloon as hot lead bored through air and cringing flesh, and roar mingled with roar. Smilin' Sam was doing his first and last good turn for the honest citizen. His thumbs worked like Trojans on the knurled hammers of his blasting guns.

A leaden hail came from the gang's hot guns caught the short, powerful body of Smilin' Sam in its vortex. The very weight of the lead was trying to push him backwards. But he leaned into it, letting it support him. He braced his pillarlike legs, and poured tunneling lead at Wolf and his falling gunnies.

In five short seconds, the leaden hail that was holding Sam up, ceased. Smilin' Sam, still grinning like a death's head, went forward on his face, but he didn't feel the impact. His empty, smoking Colts bounced from his paralyzed hands and almost

fell on the four bloody corpses some ten feet from the old outlaw's head. Wolf Snell and his three henchmen were boot-hill bait.

IT was only five minutes later, that a hatless young man, Johnny Sprague, came galloping into Tarantula with a Colt clutched in his hand. The ranger saw the crowd gathered at the doors of a building that had a sign on its front which read: SNELL'S SALOON. He unforked and shouldered his way in. There was a big lump on his head.

As he worked his way inside, the mutter of the crowd came to his ears.

"That short jasper is finished, but he shore cleaned up Tarantula!"

"Yeah, jest walked in an' gut-blasted the whole bunch."

"Said he was a ranger, but he shore acted funny for one."

The sawdust under Smilin' Sam's body was stained a gory red. But his fingers were still working gently as if he were clutching at his ebbing life. Johnny rolled him over carefully and cradled the graying, lolling head in the crook of his arm.

"That yuh, Johnny?" asked the outlaw softly. There was a bubbling sound down deep inside of him. He slowly opened his eyes. "Thought yuh'd be along soon, an' I was sorta waitin'. I—I didn't hit yuh very hard—even left yore gun with yuh."

"Git a doctor!" snapped the ranger to the gaping crowd.

"No use for the sawbones—got a pound o' lead in my carcass," gritted Duval.

"Why did you do this, Sam?" began Johnny. "Why did—"

Smilin' Sam stopped him with a feeble motion of his hand. "I—I know, son—there's a hundred questions in yore head," he gasped. "But first—how is yore mother?"

"She's fine, but why—" began the ranger.

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"I—I'm a-comin' to that, son," answered the dying man. Slowly and haltingly Smilin' Sam told Johnny his story.

"Mother never told me," said Johnny softly.

"Yuh see, son, I just couldn't—let yuh git wiped out, not my own boy," faltered Smilin' Sam. He shuddered, and blood came out of the corner of his mouth. "Hell, I—I'm gittin'—plumb sentimental!"

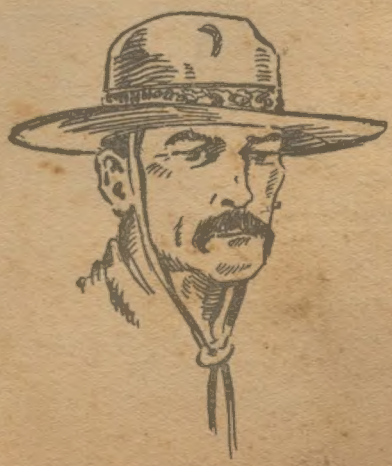
Johnny looked at the bodies of Snell and his crew. "No you ain't a bit sentimental, Dad."

The crowd did not hear the low conversation between the two men. They wondered why the hombre on the floor died with such a broad smile on his face, a smile that was almost a laugh. But Walter Sprague, alias Smilin' Sam Duval, had been called "Dad" for the first time in his owl-hoot life, and he had a reason to die as he had lived, smiling.

A minute later Johnny climbed to his feet and brushed at his eyes with a sawdust-covered sleeve.

"Say, feller," asked a bystander, "was this here hombre really a ranger?"

Johnny's reply was a little choked, but he measured each word: "Hell, yes, he was a *ranger!*"



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